

it's my feeling we'll win in the end by heroic_pants

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti)

Genre: Alternate Universe, Childhood Trauma, F/M, Found Families, M/M, Suicide Attempt, a non-supernatural horror AU, adults dealing with childhood trauma, have i mentioned there is a suicide attempt but it's not shown, the bond is strong

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

Relationships: (past), Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/Beverly Marsh, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Mike Hanlon/Stamley Uris

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Summary:

a group of childhood friends are drawn back to their home town and each other as adults after hearing that one of them attempted suicide, realising that what connects them all to each other isn't as easily forgotten as they thought - for all the bad and good that brings up. Or, the realisation that while your childhood might be gone, you can in fact, go home again.

(a re-imagining of the story from a horror to a dramedy, where the traumas that bonded them were all too human, instead of supernatural)

1. Home Is Where I Want To Be, Pick Me Up And Turn Me Round

Author's Note:

I don't really like to overexplain a fic in the summary, but I was taking a pretty big swing with this one and I thought a little warning was probably necessary, or you'd end up being like "hey why isn't anyone talking about that demon clown they fought one time, that was pretty traumatic, and also, that's nice of him to let them work their shit out without scaring them"

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my main takeaway from seeing the film was 1) that i loved it a lot but bev deserved a better arc 2) and that i was 200% more invested in the 'childhood friends reunited as adults who are collectively coping with childhood trauma' parts than the HORROR MOVIE CLOWN parts, and I kept thinking well it IS a horror movie adapted from a horror novel, and then i was like "someone should reimagine it like a modern The Big Chill, but the friend survives his suicide attempt" and then I realised it would have to be me to fill that very niche prompt. I hope this is enjoyable anyway!

Bill can't really say that he's grateful to get the call. But then, in a horribly unspeakable way, he isn't *not* grateful to receive it.

He's taking a smoke break off-set when he gets it. He gave up for a while, but it's so much easier to pick it up again being around these people. He'd only started because he read once about a king who overcame his stutter by – among other things – smoking cigarettes. That was a long time ago, on and off. He'd been, what, seventeen?

He and Audra had been having a fight, sort of. The kind of quiet, bitten-off argument you have when you know people are watching, and would love to sell information to *People* about Audra Riley

Denbrough's troubled marriage. It might be, but America isn't part of his marriage and they don't deserve to know.

He picks it up, and it's a Maine number he doesn't have in his phone. Since his mom moved to Florida a while ago, and his dad's in Ohio and he's vaguely aware most of the people he knew from home have moved away, he wonders briefly about it. He doesn't usually pick up random unknown numbers – one of the perks of any small amount of fame is that sometimes people will try and contact you in unorthodox ways – but before he even knows what he's doing, his finger goes to accept the call and he puts it to his ear.

"Bill Denbrough. Who is this?"

He's surprised by the voice on the other end, though he shouldn't be. In that moment, he remembers not everyone left home after high school.

"Mike. Mike Hanlon," he adds, like it isn't immediately apparent. There might be a lot of Mikes, but there's only one with that voice, even though it's gotten deeper with age. "You probably don't remember –" he says, suddenly sounding hesitant.

"Of course I do, Mike, God – how long's it been? I can't believe I'm talking to you!" he interrupts, disbelief turning into a wide smile as old, nostalgic memories surface. It's almost staggering, the burst of childish joy, *riding bikes in the sunshine swimming at the quarry hanging out in the clubhouse*, and something else nagging at the back of his memory, like a shy child tugging at his mother's skirt. He suddenly remembers the first time he met Eddie, such a tiny boy, clutching his inhaler, hidden behind such a large woman. *Eddie*. It's probably talking to Mike that's bringing it up, but he hasn't really thought about Eddie in years.

Or most of them, most of the time. He saw Richie once in a bar a few years back, and said hi, but they were with different people. They were going to catch up, but they didn't.

"I – " there's something in Mike's tone that makes Bill stop smiling quite so widely. "I didn't know if you'd heard yet, but I thought you should know,"

Bill's stomach drops. He waits.

"It's Stan," Mike says heavily. "He tried to kill himself. He said he was going back to his parents' house to recover, and I think we all need to be there. I think it'd mean the world to him if you were there, y'know? He always looked up to you."

"I'll be there as soon as possible," Bill says immediately, not even stopping to think about it. This feels too important.

Eddie almost crashes his car when he gets the call from Mike. Well, there's no almost about it – he does crash into another car, but it's not serious. He exchanges insurance information with the irate driver in a daze, not even angry himself, though he'd been *so frustrated* not ten minutes earlier. He can barely remember why. He'd been coming back from a work lunch, and Myra had called to loudly worry at him about the state of the roads and driving himself back from the city and whether he should just take some time off work, and then Mike had called.

He has no idea what Mike is doing now. They hadn't really gotten into it, just that he still lived in Derry, and that Stan – God, *Stan*, he feels sick. The last time he'd been in contact with Stan had to be a Christmas card, a couple of years ago. He knew Stan was married. *Is* married, he reminds himself. Or not, he realises. Maybe that's why –

He knows that he doesn't really have asthma, that it was something his mom made up to make him feel sick and small and afraid a long time ago – but what he wouldn't give for the comfort of his inhaler at this moment. He needs to – take a pill, or something. He sits in his parked, dented car and searches for the Prozac bottle he keeps in the front glove compartment. He takes one with shaking hands, washing it down with water from his stainless steel BPA-free water bottle.

Mike wants them all to come back. It's crazy. All of them together, after over twenty years of falling out of contact with each other, at varying rates.

It's crazy. He's never wanted to do anything more in the last twenty years. He starts the car up again and turns back home. He needs time to pack. And to calm Myra down.

Richie paces his dressing room.

Paces.

Paces.

Runs to the bathroom to throw up again, but nothing comes out this time.

He'd like to say it's because of the pre-show drink he had, but he knows it takes him a fair few now before he starts losing them again.

It's not possible, right? You don't just put your entire life on hold because a childhood friend called you to tell you another childhood friend had a tragedy, and that you should come and support him. Not when you haven't seen them since college. That makes no sense.

Mike. Kind-eyed Mike, who tried so hard to be the glue between them. Was, for a while. He can barely picture an adult Mike, with a job. A real one. Hopefully he's not still working at Rodney's Burgers and Fries. A hysterical laugh bubbles out of him at the thought of a much older Mike, sixty years old or more, still wearing the apron and the little old fashioned hat.

Stan, though. He can picture him as an adult. He was always prematurely old, already forty years old when they were thirteen. He remembers him very seriously reading serious books involving seventy-five hundred old Russians or French people fighting wars or whatever the fuck took that long to get through. Too *fucking* serious, apparently. Richie knows this isn't the appropriate reaction, and yet somewhere he's angry and he's not even sure if it's for the right reasons.

Everyone's depressed. Why should he go? Does this make Stan's shit

any more valid? He hasn't even seen the guy in literally two decades.

He's got tour dates in Reno, next. He's got a fucking show in five minutes. He can't be worrying about this right now. Fucking Mike. Fucking Stan. Fucking Small Town America.

Fucking – *fuck*.

He knows it, somewhere deep inside. He actually wants to go back, like the complete madman he clearly is. He's going to do it, and see all of them again, after all this goddamn time. He thinks of a face he won't even name in his thoughts, and wants to be sick. Which, in itself, is ridiculous. It's been over twenty years.

"Richie?" There's a knock on his door. "You're on in five."

"I'm coming," he croaks.

Ben wakes alone, as usual.

He gets up, even though it's still early. He never sleeps in.

He goes for a jog on the treadmill downstairs. As usual.

His mind isn't clear.

He can't help thinking about the call he got last night.

How had he let himself forget Mike?

Mike, who understood what it was like to be on the outside of an insular town more than anyone. Mike, who was just happy to be friends with them, and never made you feel like a dweeb – even when he found out what you had in your Walkman. Mike who never tried to make anyone feel like shit, even as a joke, but always laughed with you and made you feel a part of things.

It's not like he hasn't been busy in the last two decades. He's made a

lot of sacrifices for the sake of the business. Worked long hours, lost serious relationships, not made friends outside of work - and they're not really friends, not in a real way And yet, Mike's request has set off a pack of wild fire-ants in his brain.

He's ashamed to admit he can't remember when he fell out of touch with Stan. It must have been just after he got married, because he can remember sending him an email congratulating him on the wedding and apologising for being out of the country for the ceremony. He might have tried harder to go if everyone else had, but Stan had fallen out of touch with some of them already, and he couldn't bear hoping to see her there if she wasn't going to be there.

God, poor Stan. He wonders if there's anything he can do, financially – kind of out of shock, he'd offered this to Mike, in place of going, saying he was too busy with work – but Mike had just sounded a little disappointed, and had graciously thanked him, but excused himself to call the last person he needed to. Her. Beverley.

It's pathetically tragic, the way he can't totally forget her. Not that he ever had her. Not that he wanted to possess her, not in a shitty way. But no matter how many sit-ups he's done since, no matter how many miles he's run, no matter how long it's been since he got anywhere near a dessert – his personal trainer would just *know* somehow – anytime he's reminded of her, he remembers he's just the boy who loved his best friend. A girl who never saw him that way. He could never blame her for that.

Somehow, he knows this is unmissable. They might never get such an unignorable chance to be together again. As a businessman, and an adult, he doesn't believe in signs. But that little wide-eyed child, not totally buried inside him somewhere, believes this is one. The kind of shock that hurts so much it pulls them back into orbit.

He stops jogging and dictates a text to his Apple watch. "Mike – am coming down ASAP. Tell Stan I'll be there soon."

Well. Perks of owning your own high-level construction company are that you can take holidays when you want and delegate your work. He's just never wanted to do it before now.

The train trip from New York is four hours and counting. Rain drums on the window in fat little droplets, splintering smaller patterns across the glass. Beverley watches them, leaning her head against the window.

She's exhausted, and she'll need a proper shower when she finally gets there, but at least she's going.

It doesn't quite feel real at the moment. She still feels like she could wake up in their big, cold bed, with him next to her. *You dreamed you got away, darling. You dreamed you could make choices without me.*

She breathes, reminds herself to do those grounding exercises. You are here. You are now. She focuses on the splatter patterns of raindrops on the window.

Someone next to her brushes her arm and she moves back instinctively. She looks at her wrist. She hadn't realised, but green-purple bruises have come up on it. She supposes it hurts, but it's nothing compared to other past horrors. It's just a reminder. Sometimes she thinks she should tattoo them there, so she won't ever not be reminded.

It's important not to forget.

Again, she feels a pang of guilt. The same she's been feeling all day.

She and Stan had been so close once. He saw everything but he never said anything, never betrayed you like that. He was so good to talk to. He read a lot.

"What are you reading, Stan? And when did you start it, I'm assuming three years ago?" she says, laughing. He's propped up against a tree, and it's summer, and they're fifteen and carefree, or at least willing to pretend.

He looks up from the huge book with a small smile, curling the edges of his mouth up. "Very funny, Bev. It's War and Peace. It's Tolstoy."

She nods. "Russians liked to go on, I see. Is that just fifty percent the extra names and consonants?"

This makes him laugh and he shakes his head at her. "You're evil. I'm trying to read."

She laughs again. "I think you mean, 'oh Bev, what would I do without your sense of humour, I would just be a forty-year old boy reading on my own in a cold room at home.' Come swim with your friends already, old man."

He rolls his eyes, exaggeratedly. "One can dream. And I thought we weren't all swimming? Before you try it, Richie already tried to throw me in, and he nearly destroyed this book, and then I nearly destroyed him, so just know I'm ready and willing to defend myself."

She laughs. "No I'm not gonna force you to come in. I'm just saying, who knows how many more perfect lazy summers we have? To just hang out and swim, before life catches up to us?"

He shakes his head, and she knows she's found the button she was looking for. He looks at her, smiling ruefully. "That's a low blow, Beverley."

She cackles, getting up. "I know. Come on, Tolstoy's not going to be any less dead if you leave him for a while."

He laughs, marking his place in the book and accepts her hand up. In the water the boys see them walk out and a collective cheer goes up.

She rubs her eyes. How did she fall out of contact with him for so long?

She sighs. And it's going to be all of them. All of those lifelines she cut without really thinking, without even really trying to.

Mike gets up early, and potters around, not really doing anything. Full of nervous energy, his thoughts jangling about his head. He probably shouldn't have coffee, but he does.

Once he's whiled away enough time, he sends a text.

*Just going to get breakfast + coffee, you alright for me to come by after?
how do you take your coffee?*

He doesn't have much time to worry over it because the reply comes pretty quickly.

Of course, come over whenever you want. Not that it's that unpacked here. Black, no sugar, Thank-you.

Of course he texts like he emails. Very politely.

Mike remembers being told about a boy who swore at his own bar mitzvah. He hadn't been allowed to go, but they'd all told him about it. They seemed so surprised, like they wouldn't have ever expected it from him. He wasn't surprised. He knew Stan had that ability to seem serious and together on the outside, masking a whirlwind of anxiety and anger inside. He'd just cracked a bit that day. Probably much like when he...

If only he'd...

Mike shakes himself. It's not productive and it's not particularly helpful to him, or Stan, to go down that road. What happened, happened. What happens now is the most important thing.

He gets two coffees and a few pastries from the little bakery. Stan used to have a bit of a sweet tooth, but he might have grown out of it, if his coffee order is anything to go by.

He ignores the stares of two old men sitting at a table outside. You'd think after nearly forty years in this town they wouldn't find him such an oddity, and yet.

He gets back in the car and in no time is driving back down to the wealthier end of town. It's hard to live somewhere this small as long as he has and not know every part of it- almost - but he hasn't been down this street in years. It's a strange feeling. Like being a stranger in his own home, being familiar and unfamiliar. But, that's not exactly a new feeling for him, being from here.

He parks in the driveway, takes the tray up to the front door, and knocks.

He can't help thinking for a moment that he's fourteen again, and Stan's stern-faced father is about to answer the door and look down his nose at him.

But no matter what similarities Mike recognises in his adult features, the person who opens the front door isn't Mr Uris, it's Stan. Of course.

They've only seen each other a few times since he got back to town two days ago. He'd known he was coming. Stan had kept him in the loop.

Less than a week ago – he'd been marking English papers, by himself - a wild weekend – when he'd gotten the call from Stan. And how ... empty he'd sounded. How drained of anything recognisably him.

Mike hadn't completely fallen out of touch with him, but still, they hadn't talked in months. They'd both been busy, Mike assumed. He didn't want to intrude on Stan and his wife, just to be the tragic single hometown friend. He hadn't realised how long it had been.

They'd talked for a while. About nothing important. It felt nice. Nostalgic, like when they used to talk on the phone, or spend ages just talking about the books they were reading, the ones they had in common and the ones they didn't. But sooner or later, the reason Stan had called reared its head again.

"I – I want to come back. For a bit. A few weeks, maybe. You heard about my parents, a while back?" he asks. He sounds exhausted.

"Yeah, I did... I'm sorry," he says, aware that it's not enough, but not sure what else to say.

"It's ok," Stan says, immediately, then pauses. "I mean, obviously, it's not ok, but it, uh, happens."

He pauses again. Mike doesn't say anything.

"Anyway, I just wanted to say – I've been meaning to go there, maybe

clear some stuff out. It's been ... suggested to me by someone here, and my therapist, that it might be a good thing to get away. Somewhere where I – “ He stumbles for a moment. “Where I have friends. Or at least a friend. If we're still friends.”

Mike doesn't know what to say. He wants to ask what Stan's wife thinks, that they had always seemed happy together, why isn't she there with him. He shouldn't, but he finds himself asking, “Is Patricia coming down with you?”

Stan sucks in a breath on the other end of the line, sharp, involuntary and Mike regrets asking. “She's not – we're not – right now. Separated,” he says, flat.

“I'm sorry, man,” he repeats. “You don't have to say anymore. And of course we're still friends, man, after everything? You'll always have a place to stay here.”

“Thanks, Mike –“ he starts, and then his voice crumples into a sob, and he starts crying.

What's worse is that Mike can picture it, albeit not with his adult face, but the boyish face he had at thirteen. It's agonising.

“I'm - sorry,” Stan says weakly. “How embarrassing.”

“Stan,” Mike says, with every fibre of gentleness in his being. “You don't have to apologise for your shit. Not with me. You know that, alright? I don't want you to be upset, but don't ever feel sorry for it. Feel what you have to feel.” He pauses. “How soon are you coming?”

“As soon as I can, honestly.”

Stan looks tired, his face lined. His glasses make him look older than he is. But he smiles a little at the coffee cups, taking one off Mike's tray.

“My therapist said I should try and wean myself off coffee, but she's not here, so,” he says, a little too lightly. At the look on Mike's face he says, “I'm only having, at most, two a day. And not after lunch. It's not like I'm doing any drugs.”

Mike sighs. "I know. I'm not trying to wrap you in cotton wool, I just want you to be healthy."

Stan nods. "Noted. Won't you come in? We can sit on one of three available chairs in the living room."

Mike nods. "Well, at least they won't have plastic covers." The few times Mike had come over when they were kids they had only been allowed to sit on the plastic covered couches. He never felt comfortable.

Stan grins, a little rueful. "That's true."

Mike looks at Stan over the lid of his coffee. He just needs to tell Stan, and it'll be fine.

Stan narrows his eyes suspiciously. "What's with you? You seem very amped. Did you have coffee before this?"

Mike attempts an innocent, chill expression. "No – well, one. Maybe. When I got up. I didn't want to wake you up too early. I'm fine."

Stan gives him a look. "You seem it. What's going on? Spill it, Hanlon."

Mike takes a sip of his coffee and looks at Stan.

"Ok. So I did something. And you might not be happy. But I think it might be really good," Mike says quickly.

Stan, somehow, narrows his eyes more. "What did you do?"

Mike sighs. "So, the hospital mental health advisor, and your therapist both said you should be around friends or family at this time, when you're recovering, right? But I can't be here all the time, you know I have to be at the school – and I thought, maybe you'd get lonely –"

"I'm not going to try it again, ok. You don't have to have a rota to mind me, Mike," Stan cuts in irritably.

Mike continues, trying to not be annoyed himself. "I know, Stan. I'm not trying to infantilise you, can you just let me tell you?"

Stan looks at him, then relents, nodding.

Mike looks at him. "I invited them all back here. The Losers."

Stan looks surprised, but Mike can't tell if it's positive or negative. He doesn't say anything for a moment.

"So they know then..." he says quietly, and Mike feels terrible, instantly.

He has a habit of thinking if he can just get people where they need to be they'll forgive what he had to do to nudge them along. But he should know, the means don't justify the ends, and this wasn't his secret to tell.

He looks at Stan, guiltily. "I...look, man, I don't have an excuse. I'm sorry. I couldn't think of another way they'd all come down. And I really think you need them. But I am really sorry, that was shitty of me."

Stan's eyes are misty behind his glasses, but he breaks into a small smile. Mike wasn't expecting that, and doesn't know what to say to it.

"It was. But I guess ... I should be kind of, insanely grateful that I have such intense, weirdo friends that care enough about me to pull this shit," he says, and his voice is a little shaky. He gives Mike a strange look behind his glasses.

Mike can remember when he first got them.

"Do I look stupid?" Stan asks, putting them on. "It feels weird to have them on."

Mike smiles. Stan kind of looks like an owl with them on, but Mike's kind of always thought of him as an owl. Wise and watching. "No, they look great. It makes you look – distinguished. Like an old white guy professor."

Which you'll probably be, one day. When you're an adult."

Stan laughs. "You're saying that to make me feel better. I swore in temple, and now I'm probably not ever going to be a proper man."

"The way I see it, having a temper tantrum in a public place and swearing at people is at least seventy-five percent of being an adult man," Mike laughs. "Can I try them?"

Stan grins and hands them over. He laughs as Mike puts them on. "Oh my god, you look like Urkel," he laughs.

Mike laughs a lot, even though it's the sort of thing only his friends can get away with. "Shut up, George McFly," he says, handing them back to Stan.

Stan laughs harder until they're both laughing so hard that they're crying, which makes a passing Richie ask why, and he gets really mad when they can't stop to explain – which only makes them laugh harder.

Mike looks down at his coffee cup for a moment, and then up. "Wouldn't be here if I didn't. But thanks, too."

He watches Stan take another sip. Stan wears a lot of long-sleeved shirts. He can only imagine that his arm is bandaged under there, and it hurts to think about.

"So, it's all of them?" Stan asks.

Mike nods. "Yep."

Stan looks surprised. "Even Richie? Isn't he like...touring? And isn't Ben kind of busy, being a titan of industry or whatever the fuck it is that he does?" He pauses. "Not to mention Bill, although I have no idea what he's up to other than I thought he was doing stuff in Hollywood. Is he working on a book, or a movie, or something?"

Mike shrugs. "I wasn't sure about them. But Bill pretty much said he'd come right away. Ben just got back to me weirdly early in the morning, but I guess, businessman hours. Said he'd be here ASAP. And I got a weird voicemail from Richie that I'm pretty sure meant he was taking a break from the tour to visit."

Stan nods. "I mean, I don't want him to get sued or anything. Can you tell him it's not that important?"

Mike nods. "I told him not to put himself in a bad position, but he actually seemed pretty set on coming and seeing everyone when he texted me back."

Stan raises a subtle, knowing eyebrow. "Yeah, I can imagine he is."

Mike smiles, a little. "Yeah. It's been a long time."

"So when are they coming?"

"Uh, tomorrow?"

Stan groans, and starts to laugh, making Mike laugh. "You are the *worst*. Good thing you're also super empathetic, because you're single-minded to a fault, *Michael*."

Mike laughs, surprised. "Ok, don't *psychoanalyse* me, *Stanley*."

Stan laughs too, again. "Alright, alright."

Bill reaches the old guesthouse after driving for a few hours from the airport in a rental car. Not nearly as nice as his car back home, but he wasn't trying to be especially flashy.

After he'd explained to her why he had to go, Audra had been understanding, but he knew she wasn't happy.

"It's just for a few days. Just to make sure he's ok," he'd said, as the lyft driver loaded his bag into the back.

She nodded. "We can move on with other scenes for now, but don't stay away too long, ok?"

"I won't".

She gave him a strange, sad look. "Also, because I'll miss you."

He looked back at her, aware that the driver was now waiting for him to get in. "I'll ... I'll call you when I get in. You won't have time to miss me."

He's never stayed in the guest house before. He lived with his parents, and then he always stayed with them when he came back on breaks from college, and then he just started coming back less and less. He stopped all together, when his parents decided being here was too full of memories and sold the house to go live in Florida.

It's an old building, and it's been a guesthouse for as long as he can remember. He walks up the stairs, and drags his little bag into the lobby.

There's no one at the front desk. *Off to a great start.*

He looks for a bell, finds it and rings it. It looks ancient, like it might have been here since the Revolutionary War. Even the noise it makes sounds geriatric.

"Bill?"

He turns around and for a moment, blinded by the sudden light from the open door, he sees her like the last time he saw her. Seventeen, her hair grown long again, in that cute little sundress she wore under the ugly blue graduation robes they had to wear to receive their high-school diplomas.

He blinks. "Bev?"

She looks great. Her hair is shorter again, albeit not as short as the summer she cut it all off. He'd personally thought it looked great, but she could have cut it into a mohawk and he'd have thought she looked cute. He doesn't like to dwell on why she did it though. It hurts to even think about it.

She looked, just for a moment, worried, as she walked in. But now she breaks into a smile, and it suddenly doesn't matter to him that they haven't so much as talked in over twenty years.

"Come and give me a hug, then!" she says, walking up to him. He meets her in the middle and does as she says, putting everything that happened to one side. He's just *missed her*. They were friends before

they were anything else, and he's missed her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sure I don't smell great, I've been on trains so long I've lost track of time and space," she jokes. Actually, he thinks she smells great – maybe a little like traveling, but also faintly like expensive perfume. Not the kind that Audra wears, thankfully. He doesn't tell her any of this though.

"Well, in that case, it's Tuesday. And you're in Derry," he jokes back.

She laughs, and it turns into a kind of sigh. "God, we really are, aren't we?"

He half-laughs. "Yep. Somehow. So you haven't been back since..."

"Graduation," she finishes, a little awkwardly. "I wanted to, but it was ...

He shakes his head. "No explanation necessary. It's not like most of us were here."

She gives him a grateful smile, and then they're interrupted by an old woman who's walked up behind them.

"Checking in, dears? Come up to the desk with me."

Bev smiles at him and goes to grab her bag.

Ben has always liked driving through Maine. It's been a while though. He doesn't have any projects here, and the ones he has keep him plenty busy. He can afford to fly his parents out to Seattle, and they seem to like it, so he hasn't really been back since college.

He could have hired a driver. But he gets driven around a lot, and he likes driving, especially on big open roads like these, watching the scenery go past the window.

He's not expecting the gut-punch of mingled nostalgia and childhood

anxiety that he's soaked with when he turns into Derry, and the streets become instantly familiar.

He passes the library, and wonders how much time he spent there.

It's surprising how much how much the main street has and hasn't changed. There used to be a milk bar, he remembers, they used to get milkshakes there.

There's the street where Richie and Mike stood up for him against some older kids, and really, it was just that Mike was taller than them that probably got them to back off. Which was funny on its own, because if they'd known him at all, they'd have known he was the gentlest of all them.

He sees himself walking home with Bev in the summer, both of them holding quickly melting ice-creams. *Bev*. God. This is ridiculous. He's an adult, and he's been one for some time. He's not a sweaty-palmed thirteen-year-old anymore.

Awful how just being here kind of makes him feel like it though.

He pulls up to the guesthouse. Why this is the only place to stay that isn't miles out of town, he doesn't know. But he's here now.

He takes a breath and gets out of the car, and immediately sees a familiar face.

Eddie's just pulled into the old guest house parking area – not that it's much of a parking area, there are like four spots max, and then it's drive-around-till-you-find-something for any unluckier customers – when he sees a black BMW pull up.

Eddie watches, but the driver doesn't get out, and he can't see in the window. As he gets out of his own car, he's struck by the sudden realisation that this is almost certainly someone he knows. Well, it's Derry, so he knows a lot of people here, but it's gotta be one of his old friends, staying at the guesthouse too. It's an expensive looking

car, so whoever's renting it has money. His heart does a funny jump, like when you miss a step on the stairs. It wouldn't be...

A man gets out of the car, and to Eddie's surprise and slight disappointment he doesn't recognise him. He's tall, dark haired, very handsome, which is not something Eddie would admit to cataloguing, but he can't help thinking it anyway. He wonders briefly if he's an actor – if something's shooting around here – but they never shoot things around here – and then he turns and looks at Eddie, and his face breaks out into a strangely familiar smile.

"Oh my god, Eddie!" he says easily, like they've known each other since they were children. Which, Eddie realises with a shock, they have.

"Ben Hanscom?" he asks, incredulously. He'd pretty much arrived there by rapid process of elimination.

He strides over, and Eddie is starting to see it now. He's lost a lot of weight, and his hair is darker, with the beginnings of grey – maybe from stress, maybe just because they're fucking *old* now, which seems impossible, but he carries it off in a distinguished kind of way – but his eyes are the same colour, and his smile is the same. If Eddie didn't know for a fact they were the same age, he'd assume he was younger, because he's aged *very* well. Maybe the uber-rich really do drink the blood of virgins to stay young, or something.

Ben hugs him, and for a moment Eddie remembers how tactile they all used to be. Which, for late 80s-90s small-town Maine seems crazy to him now. He has a sense memory of Ben's heavy, comforting arm around his shoulders, passing him a paper bag with the other, when he had a panic attack once, terrified that he'd failed this quiz and therefore flunked the class and might have to go to summer school.

He hadn't even failed the quiz. Ben had never brought it up, that he'd freaked out over nothing.

"It's so good to see you, Eddie. You look just like I remember – but taller," he says, grinning good-naturedly.

"Well you really *don't* ... I didn't even recognise you until you called

out to me, but you look great, anyway, Jesus ... how much crossfit do you *do*?" Eddie says, and he can't help sounding incredulous.

Ben laughs, but there's something not quite reaching his eyes. "It's nothing. I lost a few pounds. It's not that exciting."

"Speak for yourself, man," he says, shaking his head in disbelief. "If I looked like that, I'd definitely rub it in everyone's face."

Ben laughs, shaking his head. "It's really not a big deal. So you're staying at the guesthouse too?"

Eddie looks up at it and back. "Oh...yeah. Isn't it great that in the time we've been gone, they haven't opened a second place to stay in this town?"

Ben grins. "Yeah, I thought it might be at least a two-horse town by now."

Eddie chuckles. "I think they hit the millennium and were like, let's stay here."

They look up at it, seemingly both anticipating.

"Alright, let's go," Ben says, in a very matter-of-fact way. Eddie remembers vaguely that he's in some kind of big business, and can definitely see it now.

Eddie sighs. "Ok. Just let me get my bags from the car."

Ben raises an eyebrow. "How much did you bring?"

"Uh, just...two bags. And my backpack," Eddie says, trying to be casual.

Ben grins again. "You really haven't changed. C'mon, I'll give you a hand."

Eddie and Ben decide to take one car to the restaurant where they're supposed to be all meeting up. Secretly, Ben's kind of glad he's not going alone. It seems so much easier when he's going with one of them.

Eddie is the same, kind of exactly how he pictured him as an adult. Full of anxiety-fuelled fast-talking, always going on about some weird disease or medical case, still sort of snarky. It's funny the things you don't even realise you miss.

He says he's married, when it comes up, but he changes the subject quickly. He doesn't really talk about her at all.

"Do you mind if I go ahead? I just need to inform the staff about my dietary requirements," Eddie says, seriously. Ben nods, with a small smile.

Eddie heads off inside to harangue the staff, and Ben heads after him.

"I don't believe it! Ben?" A voice comes from his left. His heart traitorously skips a beat, just hearing her voice. Why can't he be calm around her? He's never truly been able to be calm around her, even if he got good at pretending.

Why does being back here make him feel so childish and emotional? He doesn't have much time for relationships back home, but he's considered a very 'eligible bachelor'. And yet, he comes back here, he hears her voice once, and he's fourteen and miserable again, because he wants her to be happy and he wants Bill – the first person to let him in, bring him into the group – to be happy as well, but it hurts to see them so loved-up.

He turns to her, and smiles in what he hopes is a casual way. "Bev?"

She smiles at him, looking amazed. "Wow, you look...really great, wow... it's so good to see you, Ben."

He can't help beaming at her. She's no less beautiful, but it was never about that. Well, it was *mostly* more than that – it was about the kind of person who could be coping with so much of her own shit from every direction, and still find the empathy to befriend the awkward

new kid. Looking back, he'd had no chance of not falling for her. "It's really good to see you, too," he replies, still beaming.

She hugs him. She still smells good, although wearing a more expensive perfume these days. He can feel a ring on her ring finger digging into his back. He can't exactly be surprised that she's married. He wonders vaguely what her husband is like.

There's so much more he wants to say before they go in, and it's everyone together, except that he also can't.

She looks at him, smiling. "Ben, I –"

Then they hear a familiar voice.

"What the fuck? Why do you guys look amazing, and I look like shit now?"

Richie almost chickens out. Which seems insane. Why come all the way here, why put the tour on hold, just to not see these people?

It's just for a moment, in his room at the guesthouse, that doubt creeps in. It's been a long time. He remembers that he didn't end up catching up with Bill the one time he managed to run into him in a bar in L.A, and he can't remember what he was so busy with that he couldn't call his first best friend back. Then again, it's not like Bill ever tried to get in contact either, for fuck's sake.

He waits. He watches the shitty little TV, and he would almost bet it hasn't been replaced since he was in high school. He watches his phone clock. Then he jumps up, grabs his jacket, and gets the hell out of the guesthouse.

He guns it in on familiar roads, in the kind of car that thirteen-year-old him would have salivated over. He connects it to his phone, and finds some Springsteen. The kind of music that strangely makes him both full of some kind of emotion, and still makes him feel pumped up. The big guns.

Stay on the streets of this town, and they'll be carvin' you up alright. They say you gotta stay hungry. Hey baby, I'm just about starvin' tonight, Bruce sings, and something about being here, listening to this reminds him of being sixteen and listening to Bill's Dad's records, feeling some kind of emotion he couldn't even really name if he'd been asked.

Can't start a fire, sitting around crying about a broken heart. He forgets about that line every-time.

"I don't get why you guys like this so much," Eddie complains.

Richie pokes him in the side, and Eddie squirms away. "It's not my fault you don't understand adult emotions, asshole. Don't worry, I'm sure puberty will hit you any second now."

Bill coughs, failing to cover a laugh, and Richie smirks to himself. Eddie pokes him back. For all that he mocks him, it was much easier to get one over him when they were thirteen and he was definitively the smallest of them. He just had to go and get taller and better at fighting back, didn't he.

"Fuck you, I'm still growing," Eddie replies grumpily.

If he does, he's going to outstrip Richie at some point. Richie isn't a fan of that idea. How would he even cope with a tall Eddie?

"Man, I ain't gettin' nowhere

I'm just livin' in a dump like this

There's somethin' happenin' somewhere

Baby, I just know that there is,"

Bill sings along quietly, closing his eyes. He blows smoke out and passes the joint to Richie.

"I don't know how he does it. I feel like he's just – cutting me open, but in a good way?" he says slowly.

Richie takes it, breathes in, holds it, breathes out. "Fuckin' a, man."

"Why do you guys even like this stuff? We were in like, third grade when it came out. It's your dad's music," Eddie tries again, irritably.

"Just because you and your mom have the same bad taste in music," Richie retorts. "Would you rather we put on some George Michael?"

"Fuck off, Richie," Eddie says.

Richie can't help annoying him, because what else is he gonna do? So he turns to him and offers him the joint. "It might help you chill out. I'm sure you could use that."

Eddie scowls at him. "No, I don't need that, thanks. It's a –"

"If you say 'gateway drug' I'll have to smother you with this cushion, Eds," Richie cuts him off, and Bill definitely doesn't disguise his laugh this time.

Eddie glares at him, and then to Richie's definite surprise, plucks the joint right out of his mouth and puts it to his lips. Richie can't help watching him, even though he should look away but his head is heavy and the music is paralysing him a little. He watches Eddie take a breath, and suddenly panics that asthmatics shouldn't smoke weed, before he remembers that Eddie isn't really asthmatic.

He only coughs a little, then hands it back to Richie, still annoyed with him. Richie wonders if he's ever noticed those colours in Eddie's eyes before, or whether he's just really high.

"You happy now, asshole?" Eddie asks.

"Can't start a fire, sitting around crying about a broken heart," Bruce sings in the background, and Richie turns his head to look at the ceiling again.

"Thrilled, although who have you been smoking with, huh? That was way less dramatic than I expected, Eds," he jokes, not looking at him.

"Yeah, actually, you're suspiciously not bad at that for a first-timer," Bill puts in, slowly.

"I never said I was a first-timer," Eddie replies, testily. "I tried some of

Bev's at Mark Donnelly's party. I didn't like it though. I just wanted to shut Richie up."

Bill laughs again. "A noble goal, although no one's managed it so far."

"You can't start a fire, worryin' about your little world fallin' apart," Bruce sings, and Richie feels like he might explode, but with what he can't say.

"He just fuckin' gets it," he mutters, and Bill murmurs an agreement.

Suddenly, Richie's in the carpark of a Chinese Restaurant that must be new. Derry hadn't been particularly multicultural or welcoming before he'd left.

Mike had texted them to ask if they wanted to meet up for dinner, and Richie can't see how this won't be awkward – probably he's not allowed to mention why they're here, even though they all know why they dropped everything to come – but he's also strangely pumped to see everyone. He feels like he's forgotten that he's been waiting for this day forever and it's finally happened. The power of Bruce, maybe.

He gets out of the car, and sees two people outside the restaurant, hugging, one with strangely familiar hair.

Bev. He feels a rush of affection already that shocks him. Calm down, you weirdo.

She's with a tall, handsome man who has to be some kind of athlete or male model. Maybe this is her husband. He's certainly on her level – she's aged much better than he has, but she's probably actually been taking care of herself for twenty years.

Then he hears her call him Ben, and if he was shocked before it's nothing to how he feels now. Next to him, Richie feels like his elderly uncle, not his contemporary.

"What the fuck? Why do you guys look amazing, and I look like shit now?" he says, half-annoyed and half-just strangely nostalgic and happy.

They turn and beam at him, and seem genuinely excited to see him. Like the past twenty-two years are nothing, it's just been a particularly long summer away from home.

He hugs Bev, and then Ben, and is still shocked by how good it feels to see them again. And to think he wasn't going to come tonight.

Ben looks at the entrance. "Shall we do this then?"

Richie sighs. "Ok, but if anyone else has become a model since I last saw you guys, I'm fucking leaving," he jokes weakly, unable to fully hide how keen he is now.

Bev laughs. "Come on, Richie. The Pork Lo Mein awaits."

2. (I Ain't A Boy, No I'm A Man And) I Believe In A Promised Land

Notes for the Chapter:

took me a while to update this, but i bring you an unexpectedly long chapter to make up for it!

(also a note, if you care about this sort of thing: someone in this chapter implies eddie could be bisexual, but my reading of him is definitely more that he's a repressed gay man, so there you go)

“You look anxious, Mike. It’ll be fine,” Stan says calmly, sitting down at the table.

Mike looks at him. “I’m not anxious. I’m fine. How are you doing?”

Stan gives him an unconvinced look over his glasses. “Better than you, I think. They’ll be here.”

Mike nods, a little too fast. “They’ll be here.”

They will be – or at least most of them will. He’s still not sure if Richie will turn up.

He goes out of their private area to see if anyone’s here yet and sees him, and gets the strangest kick of nostalgic warmth.

Of course Bill is here first. He was called first. He was their unofficial leader.

He looks a little more tired, going a little grey in wisps at the front of his hair – but it makes him look kind of distinguished, too, like an author should look.

Mike feels a rush of affection, some kind of overwhelming gratefulness for Bill’s steady dependability – the guy that was always there for you, inviting you over if you couldn’t study at home, sharing his things with you, ensuring you got invited to the same

parties – which propels him into a hug that’s probably a little too long.

Bill doesn’t try to squirm out of it, just hugs him back.

“Sorry, I –” Mike says, letting go of him, smiling sheepishly. “It’s just really good to see you again, Bill. I don’t even know how long it’s been?”

Bill shakes his head, smiling the kind of relaxed smile that makes him look years younger. “No, it’s been...too long. Wasn’t it Stan’s wedding? That was what, 2005?”

He lets out a low whistle. “It can’t have been that long ago, God.”

Mike shakes his head. “No, I actually remember now – your book signing, here? It was like, maybe a year after that. When you published your first book, and obviously, people loved it – I always knew they would, if you ever got your writing out there – sorry, I’m being weird, I probably had too much coffee today –” He laughs, but feels even more awkward and embarrassed. He’s definitely jittery from the three coffees he’s had today and it’s making his thoughts and memories trip over each other in their haste to get out.

Bill laughs, but not meanly. It’s affectionate and familiar. “Will you stop apologising to me, Mike? You’ve always – you were always supportive. It meant a lot. Still means a lot.”

Mike nods. “Well, I always knew people would see your talent.”

Bill looks at him. “Actually, I remember that signing – we caught up for a drink after, right? God, I was so nervous – everyone was acting like I was some bigshot now, and I’d only published one book, I felt like such a fake. I can’t believe how long ago that was.”

“Yeah,” Mike says, with a sigh. He remembers it too, but was surprised to hear Bill describe it like that. When they’d met he’d been perfectly humble about the book’s success, but there had been an undeniable air of confidence around him when he’d come back that last time – a real feeling of having beaten this place somehow, having escaped.

“So, is Stan here yet?” Bill asks, in the slightly heavier atmosphere that’s settled around them.

Mike blinks. “Oh no! I was only coming out to bring you back to the table, and I got distracted. Stan’s back there.”

Bill laughs. “I’m sure he’ll understand,” he says, and then his smile fades. “Is he...alright?”

Mike looks at him, as they walk back to the table. “He’s...doing better, I think. It’s only been a few days though. Hard to tell,” he says, in an undertone. “Glad you’re here, though. I know he will be too.”

Bill nods, looking pensive. “Glad to be here, honestly.”

Stan is sitting at the round table, reading. Mike is momentarily charmed by the realisation that he brought an emergency book to the restaurant even though he might not get to read it all night.

“Is that an ornithology book?” Bill asks, so fondly that Mike is glad he came first. It feels right, somehow.

Stan looks up and blinks, owlishly. Mike constantly used to think that it’s a good thing Stan liked birds so much, maybe because of this bird-like quality in him - even though he’s not as small and skinny as he was then.

“Yeah,” he says, standing up but looking a bit caught off-guard. Maybe for all his reassurance earlier, he hadn’t been certain they were coming either.

Bill smiles softly, and Mike remembers why he was sort of the leader – not through overconfidence, cockiness or boisterousness – just because of that friendly, warm, steady quality he had. Still has.

“Some things never change then, Stan?” he says, walking over and Stan looks at him, eyes a little misty behind his glasses, and he breaks into a genuine smile.

Mike can’t help smiling wider at this. Smiles like that have been few and far between on Stan, recently. Understandably.

Bill draws Stan into a tight hug, and Mike feels less embarrassed about hugging him earlier. Bill hasn't lost that affectionate, protective quality.

"I know I, I haven't been here for you but I'm here now," Bill says, with some repressed emotion. "I just want you to know that."

"Thanks, Bill," Stan says, in a tight voice. "I'm just – I can't believe you're here, God."

Bill looks at Mike. "If it weren't for this fucking *amazing* friend of ours, I wouldn't be. Not that I didn't want to – I just, I wouldn't have known if not for him. We really - owe him. Big."

Stan smiles a little more, again. "Yeah, he's pretty amazing, our Mike. He's been really helpful with my temporary move-in at my parents' place. Not really something you wanna do on your own," he says, with a wry smile.

"It's nothing," Mike deflects. He's never been good at taking compliments. "It's what you do for your friends. Your best ones, anyway."

Stan smiles even more, and Mike wishes he could write it down like a formula. A cribsheet for a test. Exactly what it takes to pull a smile like that out of someone hurting so much, so quietly. There's some look in his eyes that Mike can't quite parse, but he doesn't ask. Stan's entitled to his private emotions, as well as the ones he makes public.

"Speaking of, who else is coming? Am I the only one you told to come at this time?" Bill jokes to the two of them.

At that moment, as if on cue, they hear a familiar voice speaking quickly to someone.

" – and if anything I eat has peanuts it could literally...kill me..."

They turn in unison, and the speaker slows the tide of information he's haranguing the waitress with as he sees them.

Eddie, Mike thinks. Taller, but kind of exactly how he pictured him. Well, he'd grown the last time they'd seen each other, which had to

be – what – college? When did he stop visiting his mother? Or did she move? Mike can't remember. But it's not like he knew her well. He'd often got the vibe she didn't like him – for the same reasons various older white people in Derry didn't, either.

He stares at them, almost like he's shocked to see them there. Which is impossible, because he knew what he was coming here for. "Wow," he says. "So this is really happening, then."

Eddie doesn't know what he was expecting, but looking at three of his childhood friends is a surreal experience. It's been so long since he actually saw any of them, in the flesh. They both look older and like no time has passed. Eddie feels simultaneously like a middle-aged man with anxiety and a job and a wife and like a thirteen-year-old boy, smaller and still full of anxiety but excitement too. He feels exhilarated.

They all smile when they see him. "You're still harassing waitstaff with your allergies? After the Olive Garden incident of '96?" Stan says first, wryly.

Eddie holds up an indignant finger. "Hey, you wouldn't have thought it was quite so funny if that HAD turned out to be a peanut, Stan, so screw you!"

They laugh at this, easily. "It's really great to see you, too, Eddie," Stan replies, grinning. He looks tired but, in this moment at least, he looks genuinely cheery.

"Get over here already," Mike says, warmly.

He walks up to them, and is beginning to catch up with them when a gong sounds behind them. Eddie briefly wonders if one of the waitstaff rung it, but turns around to see the final three standing next to the gong – and feels for a moment like he's missed a step. Some part of him feels like a puzzle that's been missing pieces for a long time. Ben seems to have met up with Beverley outside, who looks

really good – and Richie. Of course Richie fucking banged on the gong, that's the most Richie move ever.

Richie looks at him and for a second he feels anxious and seventeen, and remembers Richie's old car. *The Grizzly*, he called it because it was a rusted reddish-brown, it growled in a scary way and getting into it was as much a death trap as feeding yourself into a grizzly bear's jaws. But then Richie says something, and everyone is coming over and he pushes the feeling to the back of his mind again.

Bev is overwhelmed, almost, by the compound effect of seeing them all together again.

It's kind of weird to see them all, some after longer than others, but the weirdest thing is how normal it feels to be together again – it's almost like they're sixteen and it's a Saturday night in town where they'll go see a movie at the old theatre and Richie will agitate for them to see *Wayne's World* again, even though they've already seen it, and they'll give in after much cajoling, being snuck in the back by Stan, the world's most trustworthy-looking sixteen year old employee even on his days off, spreading out across a whole row, prodding each other and throwing popcorn and laughing.

And yet, they're not kids anymore. Everyone seems a little more tired. She knows she is. She makes her way across the group, to where Mike and Stan are.

Mike lights up, seeing her and she finds herself smiling so widely her cheeks are already starting to hurt, but she couldn't stop if she tried. "Mike!" she exclaims in delight, throwing her arms around him. He hugs her back tightly.

"It's been too long, wow," he says, fondly, if not also a little wistfully.

She shakes her head. "I know, I'm sorry, life has just gotten really... you know. Busy," she finishes, lamely. How is she supposed to explain why she let herself fall out of contact? She idly adjusts her

cardigan sleeves, pulling them further down over her wrists.

“Cold?” Stan asks, casually. If she didn’t know better she’d say *too* casual, the way he used to be a little *too* good at observing you, figuring out your problem before you told him. But he smiles at her, and she can’t help but be overwhelmed with affection. There’s grief in there, too, but she doesn’t want to start crying right now if she can help it, so she pushes it down.

“You know me, I’m always cold,” she covers, jokingly. “I’m so happy to see you, Stan,” she says, and he smiles but there’s something in his eyes that she can’t stand to look at, so she just pulls him into a hug too.

“Same to you, Bev,” he says, quietly, and there’s something grateful in his voice.

The seven of them are gathered at the table in the backroom, and Richie might not have felt this good in years.

The waitress brings them their drinks, and they raise them to each other.

“I now call this meeting of the Losers Club to order,” Richie says, half-joking, but everyone cheers.

If it weren’t for the physical evidence in front of his eyes, he would say it’s impossible that they’ve been away from each other for so long. They slip back into their old rhythms so easily, talking, laughing, joking, saying “Hey, fuck you, Richie, but I like my job,” with their little pinched up angry expression, well, he had to try and pull it out of him, for old times sake – well, ok, that last one is just Eddie, but what is he supposed to do, just *listen* to Eddie talking about being an insurance analyst or whatever the fuck? It’s a public service. And Stan doesn’t need to be any *more* miserable.

He’s aware that he’s not particularly mature even when he’s sober, and he’s had more than one drink tonight. Something about seeing

them again though, something about how Eddie looks exactly like the kind of adult he pictured – anxious and pained and easy to annoy, but in an adult polo and slacks, because *of course* – means he has to annoy him every chance he gets, just to see the look on his face.

And he's married to someone, but he won't rise to Richie's bait to talk about her. He can't even imagine it. The kind of fucking crazy-person who'd have married him, with all his habits of talking to the waiter about his allergies, and ranting about the airport he flew through when he came down from NYC and how people don't even think about how airports are incubation points for diseases, and his tic of pointing when he gets annoyed. *Myra*. What kind of a name is that, anyway?

He talks to everyone. He talks to Bev, who's sitting next to him, jokes with her, remembers being seventeen and drunk out of their gourds and laughing so hard he thought he was going to die, just the two of them in a darkened playground after some party, maybe? He wants to say *god, I've missed your sense of humour*, but it comes out as some kind of dumb voice, some joke that makes her laugh anyway.

He's missed Stan's eye-rolls, feels like he's earning them like a badge of honour in response to him giving Eddie shit, his little unwilling smirk at Richie getting Eddie to ask who Richie had married. Everyone's doing a pretty good job of pretending they just came back to see each other, abruptly and out of the blue, just because they all needed to. The funny thing is, he'd believe it. Stan laughs with everyone, but he doesn't drink as much. Richie doesn't like the set of his face, in the moment when his smile fades a little. Surprisingly, maybe for him, he doesn't touch that. There are more fun elephants in the room to point out.

"Speaking of the, well, not-elephant in the room, Ben..." he says, because he can't *not* say something about it. Everyone – except maybe him, but he'd barely been sleeping when he'd gotten the call from Mike anyway, and then he'd barely slept since, and realised as he was throwing clothes into a bag that he might never have had clean clothes – everyone has grown up pretty well, and the little bit of grey creeping into Bill's brown hair makes him look kind of distinguished and literary in a way he's probably thrilled about, but – *Ben*. He's pretty sure he hasn't *seen* Ben since graduation, maybe – no,

wait, Christmas Break, freshman year, when he'd come back home to see his parents and Ben had been back from Yale, and Mike had been back from MU, and they'd all gone to the theatre to see, what was it, something that Ben and Mike decided on over *12 Monkeys*, fucking *right* and who says no to sci-fi and mid-90s Brad Pitt, but apparently them, they'd decided on *Jumanji*, and it hadn't actually been that bad, but he'd been thinking about how he was going to go see *12 Monkeys* when he got back to California, because at least there they *got it man*. God, he'd been going through a real pretentious little shit phase. At the time, Ben had looked how he'd always looked – a nice, straitlaced kid who'd never shed his puppy fat, and he'd never really given it a second thought. But now – he can't help making some crack about him looking like every Brazilian footballer, little voice in the back of his drunk brain snidely wondering why *that* was the first thing to come to mind, you're slipping, shut *up*. Everyone laughs in agreement, though, so maybe it's not so bad. Ben tries to downplay it, like it's just a few pushups, and not a change in diet, exercise, and even grooming, almost like he's embarrassed, but why would he be embarrassed? Eddie actually agreed with him saying, "You're like, *hot* now," and he's surprised that Eddie would agree with him about anything.

Eddie, though. He'd forgotten the way that his eyes crinkle up when he laughs, more wrinkled now but still the same, like for a moment he forgets all the anxieties life has given him and just gives into it. Richie's drunk enough to annoy him into challenging him to an arm wrestle – some artwork he'd seen somewhere crosses his mind briefly, *you construct intricate* – and maybe Eddie's drunk enough to take the bait, and to concentrate but in a looser way than he's been all night, the kind of fun that came out occasionally when he was really comfortable, hanging out in the hammock, lazy summer afternoons at the quarry, a few hours and drinks into a high school party. Richie wants to lean over and touch his face, the line of his jaw, but he's not *that* drunk yet so he doesn't. He catches Stan's eye unwittingly, and he'd forgotten that deeply annoying knowing smile too.

Mike heads outside for a smoke. He's been meaning to quit – to be

honest, it comes and goes – but lately has been just stressful enough that he's just needed the relief of it. The night has gone way better than he could've hoped though, but it's like he knew if he just brought everyone back it would be like old times.

He sees Bev is already there. She sees him, walking to stand beside her, and her expression turns sheepish. "Filthy habit, I know. Am I needed to break up a fight?"

He grins, and holds up his own pack. "Can't judge. And not since I left, but y'know, Richie is Richie."

She smiles wider, around her cigarette. "True. And Eddie is Eddie. Just like old times."

Mike raises his eyebrows briefly at her. "I'll say."

She smiles more, a little wickedly, and blows out smoke.

He lights a cigarette, and takes a drag, blows it out. His head is spinning a little from the alcohol, it's been a while since he's been group drinking. The cold air feels good on his face.

Bev looks at him, her expression kind of soft and concerned. "Are you ok, Mike? You've been the person arranging all of this, it'd stress me out."

He looks back at her, surprised. "I'm – I'm fine," he says, then looks at the cigarette in his hand. "I mean, I should probably quit – I have before, but it's just – well, the most important thing is that, is that Stan's doing ok."

She nods, and her eyes are glistening. It looks strange through the smoky haze from their cigarettes.

"Stan," she says in a husky, quiet voice after a moment. "I can't believe it. I'm so grateful he still had you. You stayed in touch."

She looks tortured saying it, staring out ahead into the dark carpark.

Mike feels a familiarly cold hand of guilt creeping up from his gut. "I – I wasn't there, though," he admits, remorsefully. "We hadn't

emailed in...maybe a year? Maybe more?"

He shakes his head, and takes a drag.

Bev looks at him, almost angry, wet-eyed. "I know you're not blaming yourself for that, right Mike?"

He wants to say something, but he can't find the words.

"I – " he tries, but his voice dies in his throat.

She looks at him. "Mike – you stayed in touch with him longest, if anyone shouldn't feel guilty..." she says, a little drunk, eyes burning with emotion. The same emotions they've both probably been repressing all day, all week. Since...

"Then I should've known better than any of you where he was at, mentally, ok?" Mike bursts out, with a tense exhalation of smoke.

He looks at her, and his head is buzzing with thoughts and regrets and too much alcohol. "Even when we were talking, I could...I knew something was up with him. But I didn't ask him about it, because I thought he – I thought he didn't need me to. That wasn't really my job. Not now, anyway," he says, and takes a final drag on the cigarette, then drops it to stub out under his heel. "I should've...kept up with him," he finishes, quietly, regretfully.

"Hey," she says forcefully, but putting her hand on his arm in an exceedingly gentle way. "Stop doing this to yourself, ok? You'll go crazy. Even if you'd seen him every day since before it happened you might not have changed anything." She drops her cigarette, stomps it out. "Do you know where his wife is? Was she around?"

He shakes his head. "No, I don't think so. He said they were separated, but he hasn't said anything more about it yet. I didn't want to push him."

She frowns. "Poor Stan....God, I didn't even meet her. Wish I'd come to his wedding, at least...I think we were overseas, and I hadn't actually *talked* to him in forever, and Tom didn't want –" she breaks off with a short, bitten off gasp, like she's burnt herself, but she's no longer holding a lit cigarette.

"It was nice," he says, smiling a little at the memory. He'd given a speech, he'd watched a beaming Stan break a glass underfoot as everyone had cheered. He'd seen Eddie for the last time before tonight, must have been before he met his wife because he'd come by himself, and they'd felt the disappearances in their group but for a moment it felt like old times again, the four of them together again at least. "We missed you."

She nods, looking regretful.

He looks at her. "Are you ok, Bev?"

She looks surprised, and then nods quickly. "Yeah."

He can tell it's the same kind of answer he'd given her earlier, dashed-off, untrue. But he doesn't know if he should just ask her.

"So you and – Tom –" he says, pausing on the name because he's never met the man but it already inspires uneasiness in him. "– What did he think about you dropping everything to come down here?"

A flicker of something – fear, maybe, or rage, or both? – passes through her expression, but she nods and looks back and it's gone. "He understood. You have to be there for family."

He decides he doesn't believe this for a moment, but the good Lord help anyone who wanted to stop a determined Bev doing what she wanted to do – or at least, that's how he'd known her as a girl, and he doubts she's changed that much as an adult.

He decides not to pursue it tonight. Her expression takes on a saddened, musing set. "I can understand why she didn't come though," she says suddenly, softly. "I don't even know what I'd do...if Tom and I weren't together, and that happened..."

He looks at the ground. "I wish she were," he says quietly. "I think he'd be happier – if she were. Instead it's just me, when I can be around."

She squeezes his arm again, looking at him with such affection it almost hits him physically, like a wave, like sunshine on skin. They used to plan to go to the beach together, to take one of their summer

days to drive out near Portland, Cape Elizabeth. They only went once, but he'd always meant to go again – why hadn't they gone again?

"I don't know what everyone else thought, but he seemed plenty happy tonight that you were here. That you did this. I reckon it means a lot."

He looks at her, and can't help but smile gratefully. He's so grateful she's here, that she's back. "God I've missed you," he says, and then, with a rush of guilt. "I'm sorry I didn't keep up with you either."

She shakes her head. "Don't even start – and I hope you know, even though it doesn't really make it better, that it wasn't like I was picking –" she cuts herself off, and her eyes are misty and painful again. She looks at him, as if he could telepathically intuit what she's trying to say to him. Sometimes, before, he used to think they almost could.

"I'm sorry I didn't come back for their funeral," she says, in the smallest voice, like she's used all of her energy even just saying it to him.

He's almost surprised by this, hadn't expected her to bring it up. "Well I guess it's – it was a while ago now. I know you sent flowers. I know you had a busy life. I understood," he says, genuinely.

She looks at him, eyes full and already threatening to overflow. "I think I was scared...to come back, then. I'm so sorry," she says, starting to cry.

He pulls her into a hug.

"It's ok," he comforts her. "It's ok. I think they were just proud of you for getting the hell out."

She returns the hug tightly, crying softly into his shoulder. "I missed you so much, Mike. My favourite and best brother."

He chuckles into the embrace. "Your *only* brother, Bev."

He's thirteen, and the summer is almost over.

He's lost and gained a lot, this summer; one that's been one of the most terrifying and fulfilling summers of his short life.

There's been a lot of news interest in what happened, a lot of journalists and media people ringing up and knocking on their doors and things of that nature. Miriam tells them all in no uncertain times that they're not to bother her foster child at all, not when he's home and not when he walks to school. Ernie has taken to giving him lifts, even though driving too much taxes him, just because of the fear of what happened, the unlikely but mentally prevalent fear that it could happen again.

He helps Miriam prepare as she ducks around cleaning, and helps get into difficult places and lift things when her arthritis plays up. "Miriam, you don't need to dust behind that – this place will already seem like a huge improvement from where she was –"

Miriam looks anxiously around and then back at him. "Yeah, but I'm just – I don't know, I want her to feel like this is a caring home?"

He smiles, and for a moment is quietly grateful to have ended up with these people. He doesn't always feel that – and he will miss his parents till the day he dies, he knows it, especially because there are things that an otherwise well-meaning and kind older white couple will never understand about his experiences in this town – but they really do care, and he knows how much worse things could be. He's seen it.

"Trust me, I think she'll know," he says, and Miriam smiles at him with unexpected emotion. They're caring people, they give him a nice life, but they're not particularly given to big emotional scenes either publicly or privately.

"Thanks, Michael," she says, simply. They always call him Michael, even though almost everyone else calls him Mike, even teachers at school. He doesn't mind, but it's the sort of thing he knows would drive Richie crazy.

Ernie should be back from Bill's place any moment. Thinking about it makes his heart twinge – after everything they went through together, all that he still has nightmares about - the fear that drove her to get out of her house, to finally talk to Bill. He thinks she might be the strongest of them all. Defiant. Stubborn. Hanging on.

Bill's parents were kind enough to let her stay temporarily – he can only imagine their recent grief wouldn't allow them to see another child suffer, if they could help it – but there weren't many registered foster carers in the whole area surrounding Derry, and a decision had been made that in order for Bev to be able to continue her studies without interruption (and maybe because of their now-public link) Miriam and Ernie Baxter were the best household to situate her in going forward. He remembers reading the official letter with them, remembering that phrase, and God, the relief.

He hears Ernie's old Ford F100 pickup rolling into the driveway, and he's suddenly nervous. He does know her – and he feels some strong, inexplicable bond to all of them, probably due to what that therapist had referred to as a "shared traumatic experience" – but he hasn't actually known her that long. Maybe she won't like being here. Maybe she'll wish she could've stayed with Bill. He'd understand that – there's something very close between them, especially in the way that they look at each other, in the way their hands find each other easily.

He hears the door open, and he and Miriam are standing in the hallway, waiting for them.

Ernie looks more solemn than usual – he's always been a quiet man, but maybe he too is thinking of what it took for her to get here.

Bev looks both better and worse than the last time he saw her. She looks skinny and pale, but her short, vivid hair is cleaner and neater. Her bruises have aged, they're not as vivid now but they've gone a sickly purplish-green colour. Luckily there's only one on her face, not as bad. She's less wired with anxiety, but more exhausted. She looks strangely timid, on the threshold with the door behind her.

"Nice to see you again, Beverley," Miriam says, in a warm but careful way. "We're so glad to have you with us."

Bev smiles at her. "Thanks, Miriam. I appreciate you and Ernie taking – taking me in," she says, stumbling over one of the words like a missed step.

Miriam seems not to be able to contain herself and hugs Bev, who hugs back. Mike wonders how long it's been since an adult hugged her, a woman. He blinks. Ernie gives him a serious look, and then nods. He nods

back. Somehow he knows what this means. Help us look after her. Be there for her.

“We’ll get your things in your new room then,” Ernie says, gruffly, after they’ve broken apart. She doesn’t really have much, just a bag – it’s small enough that she could probably bring it upstairs, but he senses Ernie would like a moment away too.

“And then give you some time to rest, dear. I’ve made something for afternoon tea, but only come down if you’re feeling up to it,” Miriam says, and looks at the two of them, smiling a little sadly. “I’ll just be in the kitchen, down the hall, if you need me.”

He thinks that she’s deliberately giving them a moment alone, and he’s grateful to her for it.

He looks at Bev, and doesn’t have time to worry if she’s happy to see him because she’s thrown her arms around him. He can feel that she’s crying a little, softly, into his shoulder.

“I can’t believe I’m finally...here. And you’re here.” she says, in the smallest voice.

“Welcome home, then, Bev,” he says, quietly, back.

“W-why didn’t we ever get that drink, what the fuck?” Bill laughs, to Richie. They’ve all switched seats again, all desperate to get face time with each other.

Richie shrugs, laughing. “I blame L.A, that fucking city makes you think you’re *so busy!*”

Bill nods, laughing. “God, I know. It’s so easy to b-buy into your own bullshit.” His stutter is coming back a bit probably because of the drinking, but probably also some kind of psychological response to being here, with these people again.

Richie snorts. “Fucking, right? It’s all, oh I’m an artisan craft-maker,

oh I'm a photographer who gets paid to make sponsored posts on Instagram, oh there's this great little vegan café you HAVE to try..."

Bill laughs. "And I w-work in the writing/film area so that's literally *everyone* I t-talk to, like, oh you h-haven't heard of this new k-kind of yoga? Oh, h-have you had a *s-soundbath* before? And all these fucking actors talking about what new su-p-perfood – " Ps have always been hard. " – They're going to obsess over next, I swear to God, s-sometimes, I really fucking can't with Audra's friends –"

Richie's laughing so hard he's crying, and Bill realises, as he's been realising at different points tonight, how much he's missed his oldest best friend.

He's missed everyone, but it's unthinkable that he's lived in the same city as his oldest childhood friend for literally maybe over a decade, and it's taken them coming home to actually catch up again. Well, they'd caught up a few times when they'd both just graduated college, and Bill had just moved there, and they were young and green and unknown, but once things had started kicking off they'd gotten *too busy*. He doesn't miss the shit jobs, or the scraping together for rent money, but he misses the feeling they had together – young and wild, immortal, drunkenly rambling around Silver Lake. With Richie, especially then, you had the feeling that you could do anything, he'd break down the door for you if he had to.

They've gotten onto Springsteen, somehow, and in a fit of pique that there's apparently no jukebox in here when he is convinced there really *should be* one, Richie starts playing a song from his phone. Maybe he's just really drunk, but the opening harmonica actually gets him in a visceral way, in his chest, he's sixteen and emotional and listening to his dad's records with Richie.

"The dogs on main street howl because they uuundeeerstaaaand, if I could take one moment into my hands." They sing along to the familiar chorus, he hasn't heard it ages. Maybe because Springsteen makes him think too much of home, and Richie, and small town angst in general.

Ben, Stan and Eddie are over the other side of the table, probably discussing business or something – he realises he doesn't know what

Stan does, they'd been so busy talking about other things he didn't ask and now he feels like he should've – and the only reaction this gets from them is a range of fond-to-annoyedly fond smiles, a look in their direction, and then back to their conversation.

“Mister I ain't a boy, no I'm a man,” they continue, and it hits harder now, because when he was a boy he thought he understood it, but now he really understands the bottled-up resentment and regret of the line.

Richie shakes his head. “He just fuckin *gets it*, Billiam.”

Bill splutters a laugh at the return of his old, dumb and very occasional nickname. “T-that he does, Trashmouth.”

They're still singing when Mike and Bev return from their smoke break, looking happy but strangely worn out – Bev's eyes are a little red, and so are Mike's, but he knows better than to comment on it here and now. He meets her eye and she smiles in a familiar way, *no it's ok. You don't have to worry.*

“What's happening here?” Mike asks, mock-incredulously.

“We leave you alone for TWO SECONDS, and you let them start sad-drunk-singing Springsteen, c'mon!” Bev says, addressing the other three.

“Hey,” Eddie starts. “You know there's no stopping them once they start with Springsteen!”

Richie laughs. “Well, I'm sorry Eds, I left my Wham! cassette in my other Walkman.”

“Fuck you,” comes Eddie's expected retort, without any real heat, along with a chopstick that Richie dodges, laughing like he'd wanted this to happen. But Richie had always gotten a kind of deep amusement and satisfaction out of baiting Eddie in this silly kind of way. He looks at Richie and smiles.

“Time to p-pay, I think?” he says, and the group agrees, picking themselves up sluggishly.

It's when they're lining up to pay, though, that the old man paying ahead of them squints at them all as he goes to leave.

"Aren't you the, uh, the Denbrough boy?" he asks, wheezy and a little imperious.

Bill stiffens. No good ever comes of being referred to as 'the Denbrough boy'. Or worse, the 'older Denbrough boy'. He tries to keep a polite smile on his face, though. "Yes, that's m-me."

He's aware of a few automatic hands on his shoulders.

The man squints at them. "It was your brother?" he asks.

Richie looks actually angry on his behalf.

His smile fades. "Yes," he says simply, trying very hard to get it out in one syllable.

The man doesn't pick up on this somehow, though. He's older than them but maybe only ten-fifteen years. Would have been well into his twenties when it happened.

He shakes his head. "Hell of a thing." He looks at Bill, then at the rest of them and he says, "Oh I remember you all now, you must have been no more than twelve, thirteen, right? You were in the papers, and on the news...what did they used to call you – the lucky seven? That's right – the Lucky Seven."

Everyone has gone very quiet. The man is speaking loud enough for a few of the restaurant patrons to hear, and some are craning for a look, some are confused, but at least one person is watching with knowing interest.

Bill sees that Stan's gone white as a sheet, and can't blame him. It's something that's still capable of stirring a feeling of dread deep in his own stomach, even just at the memory.

The Derry Police Department, Bill thinks, is busier than he would have expected. But especially today, they're probably struggling more than usual.

He looks down at his arms, and they're pale and goose-bumped under dirt and blood. He didn't get anything too bad, just some scrapes and bruises. He's lucky. He shivers, thinking about it.

He looks around the room. It's some kind of waiting room that they've been stuffed into, until the adults can figure out what to do with them, until their parents can all be called. They all look pretty sorry, together, his mother's going to have a heart attack seeing them all dirty and bloodied.

They haven't spread out too much, like they don't want to go too far from each other, even in this small room. He's glad for it, the comfort of them all together. Bev is resting her head on his shoulder, exhausted, and if he could give her a dreamless sleep he'd do everything in his power to. She's got her own cuts and bruises, too. He's not even sure what blood is whose, or whether it belongs to –

Probably some of it, but he can't deal with that right now.

Mike is sitting on the ground in front of him, arm around Richie, because he had been shaking. He and Bev need comforting the most right now, after everything, he thinks, and unconsciously reaches a hand down to hold Richie's shoulder. Richie doesn't shake him off, and Bill gets a sense that he's grateful for the weight of it, leaning into it. Eddie leans up next to him, and it's a mark of how terrifying and fucked-up everything in the last day – really the last week, but especially when they went back into the house – has been, because they're not even bickering with each other like usual, they're unnaturally quiet, knocking their skinny legs together, Eddie's non-broken arm around Richie's other side.

Eddie looks so forlorn with his broken arm. It had been broken before they'd gone into the house on Neibolt street, and Bill thinks about the courage to have experienced that pain and still come back with them, especially for him. Ben is on Mike's other side, Bev reaching a hand down every so often to steady Ben the way Bill wanted to steady Richie. Ben and Mike are talking quietly, maybe just because they need to talk about something, to stop themselves thinking about what's happened. He wishes he could be holding them all up. But they're all touching in some way, heads, shoulders, arms, leaning against legs. He feels Stan shivering beside him, they're all still a little damp and cold, and maybe one day in the future they'll be allowed to shower and change and go to sleep because it

feels like they've been here an eternity.

He looks at Stan, beside him. Stan really looks bad – his parents really are going to freak – his eye is going an ugly dark purple from where he was hit, and the adult-finger-shaped bruises on the sides of his face, and the cut above his eyebrow add up to a nasty picture of their recent violence. His eyes are still red, and he sniffs every so often. Bill returns his arm around him, and Stan looks grateful.

“When do you think they’ll come for us?” Stan asks quietly.

“I d-d-don’t know,” Bill says, honestly. “I h-hope they b-b-believe us.” He can’t tell if he’s stuttering worse because of the cold, fear or shock.

Stan nods, seriously. He looks at Bill. “You think they won’t believe us? We have proof...and there’s a lot of us. Why would we make up something so horrible, especially with what happened to –“

He breaks off, blinking. Bill wants to hug him, appreciates him being so upset for Bill’s own tragedy. Most of them hadn’t known Georgie more than Bill’s brother, and some of them had only ever known him as the person who was missing from Bill’s life, driving him to obsess over the sewers. But Stan – he’d known Stan since first grade, they’d often slept over at each other’s houses, they’d gone trick or treating together every year, he could remember watching Georgie grow up from being an infant to a little kid. Richie and Eddie had known this too, but Stan seemed to have been hit harder by it.

He doesn’t know how to say thank-you for this, so he just pulls Stan a little closer. Stan’s head droops onto his right shoulder, tiredly. Bill thinks about how strange it is that he would already have done anything for the three friends he had at the beginning of summer, but he couldn’t have ever predicted this scene – this new level of closeness between them all. Like after everything they’ve been through together, hugging and holding onto each other isn’t the most terrifying thing they could imagine. As long as no one else dies, then what do they care, anymore?

The door opens and everyone looks up. An older looking cop wearing a suit – well Bill’s assuming he’s a cop – comes in, looking as exhausted as Bill feels, and behind him is a procession of people, some of whom are arguing, in voices so loud they’re echoing into the room from the hall.

Their parents look ashen faced, some angry, some terrified, when they get in and take in the sight of all of them huddled together, dirty and bloodied and bruised and definitely still smelling of the sewers.

Then suddenly, there's a lot of movement, as various parents rush over to them to cuddle and berate them. The serious, worried-looking older couple must be Mike's foster parents, looking like they're not even sure what to say to him. He grips Bev's hand before he has to let it go because his grief-stricken mother is pulling him away into the tightest hug she's ever given him. Bev's eyes were anxious and afraid, but by some small mercy, they don't seem to have called her father in. He wishes he could bring her into the comfort of his mother, but he can't.

He can distantly hear Eddie's mother getting angry at him, edging on hysteria. He's never really liked her, but she must have been terrified when they called her. It must have been all her worst nightmares about him, after all her efforts to smother him and keep him with her. He can't really hate her for that.

"What in the goddamn hell, Bill?" his dad asks, in the same furious-anxious tone. The same voice he used to tell Bill to stop obsessing over where Georgie could have been taken. "Why would you –"

"Robert!" his mom scolds his dad, like they've been having this argument on the way over. She hasn't let go of him, just holding him by his arms now, like she can't physically let him go. She looks into his eyes, and he feels even worse to see her expression. The same wild, terrified grieving look in her eyes as when Georgie had only been missing maybe twelve hours, before it became one day, two, four, a week and then more. "Bill, they told us you all..." she struggles for the right word. "Encountered, that man on the news – please tell me you didn't go looking for him, Bill, please tell me –"

He's so tired, and dirty and still kind of in shock, and he can't lie to her. "I f-f-found h-him, Mom," he says, and finds himself crying. What little colour there is left in their faces drains away. "H-he took G-g-ge-" he says, but he can't get it out, and suddenly both his parents are hugging him so tightly he almost can't breathe, but he doesn't care. He can barely remember the last time his dad had hugged him. Certainly not since Georgie's disappearance.

When they release him, his mother says, tears still rolling down her face, "You could've been killed, do you realise that? What that would do to us?"

She doesn't even sound angry, but deeply grief-stricken, and he almost wishes she was angry. It would hurt less.

"H-h-he had Bey, and R-Richie. We - I c-couldn't let it h-happen again -" he says, and starts crying again. "I'm s-s-sorry-"

His mom just gathers him up again, comfortingly, stroking his head like when he was little. "You're alive, and that's all I care about," she says, kissing his head.

Later, the detective tells them all that they'll need witness statements and to get other things from their clothes and skin to test against their database, and then they'll be able to go home, but that part of it is a more of a blur, and he can only remember the cops saying how lucky they were, how lucky, how lucky to have escaped, but he doesn't feel too lucky.

Being recognised, even just by the old man – although other people must have heard of it, at least – really puts a dampener on the night. It was the best reminder they'd had yet of why most of them have spent years avoiding this town like the plague. And yet, before it they could have all forgotten why they were friends in the first place, just that they were friends and that the only important thing was that they liked hanging out together so much.

Stan can't quite forget why they're here, and worse, what brought them together in the first place. Maybe the two are linked. He feels like people want a clear explanation, *why did you do this, show your work*, and he doesn't know what to give them. And for most people, he doesn't think they're entitled to everything that added up to ...

But he'd actually been having a good time tonight, even though he couldn't totally forget why they were all here. They were kind enough not to even bring it up, so he almost forgot.

But of course, someone in this town always fucking remembers. Someone always has to point it out, like you've somehow forgotten. Even though they would consider you saying something like, "Oh hey, remember when your wife left you? Remember when your childhood dog died? Remember that time in tenth grade when you got your ass kicked in front of everyone?" to be incredibly rude and intrusive, they bring it up. But it's ok for them, because it was *on the news*.

Mike looks guilty, like it's somehow his fault. Mike has always put so many burdens on himself, sometimes Stan wants to grab him and shout, "Stop being so hard on yourself! It's not your fault what other people do!"

Not that he'd ever actually do that. Not that he wants to yell at Mike either, but it's upsetting to watch someone try so hard and accept so much blame for things that aren't his fault.

"So, we're all going back to the guesthouse then?" Richie asks. "I think there's a bar there that has probably been there since Gettysburg, but I could use a drink."

"We haven't had enough?" Eddie retorts.

"Well, you're still talking, so I need to keep drinking," Richie replies, with a smirk. Eddie flips him off, making a face.

Stan thinks about it. He should probably go back home, because it's getting late – but it doesn't feel like home anymore. It feels changed and unknown and empty, and he really doesn't want to go back home in the mood he's in.

"I should probably head home, anyway," Mike says. "It doesn't make sense for me to go to the guesthouse and back tonight."

"Yeah, I've been on trains all day, I'm exhausted. Raincheck, Rich?" Bev says.

"I'm pretty beat too, from travelling in today. I'm probably going to just crash when I get back when I get to my room," Ben says, yawning. "I'm not even sure I should be driving. Do you think it

would be ok if I left the rental car here and picked it up tomorrow morning?’

Eddie nods. “I hear that. We might have to get a cab home I think, tired and drunk is not a good combination for night driving. Eighty-seven percent of motor vehicle accidents –“

Richie blows a loud raspberry. “I’m gonna cut you off there, chief, the biggest silent killer is, in fact being bored to death.”

Eddie makes that face again. Stan can feel himself rolling his eyes, almost automatically. Neither of them sees it, because they’re too busy bickering with each other.

“Where’s your sense of adventure, compadres?” Richie asks, animatedly. “Are we all doing the *sensible* thing?”

Bill nods. “You know, I’m in. But I’m n-not even sure that b-bar is staffed after-hours.”

“I think I should probably head back to my parents’ place,” Stan says, even though he wants to say he’ll go with them. But the *sensible thing* is where he lives, and if he’d never met these people he probably would never have done anything not sensible ever. Which is of course why he’s so grateful to know them. Mostly.

Richie and Mike look at him, a fleeting moment of *shit-he-shouldn’t-be-alone-tonight* crossing both their faces. It’s very quick but he’s gotten good at spotting it.

“Mikey, my man,” Richie says, performative as always, but he senses this is for his benefit, specifically. “Do you have any drinkable alcohol at your place? And nothing fancy, we may have all matured,” Eddie coughs disparagingly, “but our taste in liquor has not.”

Mike catches the invisible ball Richie’s thrown out to him with this. “Yeah, well I think I have some things you might like. Seems like Ben, Bev and Eddie are going back to the guesthouse, but anyone who wants to come back with me and Richie is welcome.”

Bill nods. “Sure.”

Mike looks at Stan, and Richie slings an arm around his shoulders. "Whaddya say, Staniel?" he asks. That nickname was one of many dumb ones that Richie used to use, but damn if it doesn't warm him to hear it now.

Stan wavers. He knows that they're doing this really to keep an eye on him, but them going to this effort for him is also enough to make him want to cry. Grateful tears, though. "But I'd have to drive home really late..." he says, but he's this close to giving in.

"Come on," Richie wheedles.

Mike looks at Stan, and smiles. "If it helps, I have a spare room and a very comfortable couch. You could crash if it gets too late."

"Well, I know I'm the most sober of us all here, so maybe I can drive you guys back?" Stan says, and Richie grins.

"That's my boy! Yeah!" he cheers. "Although I'm not leaving my car here, if it gets stolen the rental place will eat me alive."

In the end, it's decided that he'll drive Mike's car with Mike and Bill in tow, Richie will drive himself (to Eddie's protestations that he's drunk, and Richie's assertion that he has high tolerance, and Eddie protests that high tolerance isn't an excuse for drink-driving) and Bev – who walked, apparently it wasn't far from the guesthouse, according to her – will get a cab with Eddie and Ben.

She gives him a hug. "I'm not sure we'll be up to breakfast tomorrow, but what if we do a brunch thing?"

He smiles at this. "Maybe you can come around to mine. I'm pretty sure I've got enough stuff unpacked for brunch."

She smiles, and there's grief there, but also a lot of warmth. He doesn't ask her about the former, because who's to say it's all about him. "See you in the morning, love," she says to him.

"See you in the morning," he says, and he feels like he's promising her.

Mike's place isn't what Bill expected. It's an old building – then again most buildings in town are old buildings – but it's been renovated to keep its old character. He seems to have a lot of books, and there seems to be a lot of places to curl up and read. Bill appreciates this quality in a home. He thinks it suits Mike, can imagine him here reading, probably with a forgotten coffee next to him.

It's a bigger place than he expected, too. "You can afford this place?" he says, and shakes his head. He hasn't stuttered so much in one night for ages. It's *definitely* being back here again, maybe even psychosomatic in some kind of way. Then again, he can't discount how much he's had to drink.

"Yeah, aren't you like, a teacher?" Richie asks suspiciously, looking around. He looks at Mike. "You doing a Walter White? You breaking bad? I wouldn't judge, but I'd advise against shaving your head and growing a goatee. Well, actually, you might be able to pull it off. You *don't* have cancer, right?"

Stan makes a strangled noise and Bill groans. "Richie."

Richie shrugs. "What? That's how it starts, man."

Mike shakes his head, smiling like the joke is stupid but he can't help himself. "No, Richie. I'm perfectly healthy, you just forgot what non-Los Angeles-rent prices are like, compared to towns in Maine. *Even* with teacher wages," he adds, archly to Richie.

Bill laughs, which turns into a sigh. "G-god, if that isn't true. The L.A. h-housing market is *p-painful*." He does *like* his house, but it's hard to forget what he paid for it, and the sense that it's a little too big for just the two of them.

Richie makes a pained noise of agreement. "Yep. Paid out the ass for my condo, and I'm not even there half the time."

"Well, I seem to have misplaced the world's smallest violin, but excuse us if we're not sorry for you, given that you're both *celebrities*," Stan snarks, making them all laugh, even as Bill protests.

"I'm n-not a *celebrity*, n-nobody gives a shit about what w-writers do," he says, laughing. "It's Audra p-people care about."

"Your hot actress wife, who is what, thirty-two? Stan, where did you put that tiny violin? I know it was *just here...*" Richie mocks, miming picking it up and playing it as everyone cracks up.

Richie looks at Mike. "Hey, Mike-and-Ikes, where's the alcohol we were promised? You better not have lured us here under false pretenses," he says, raising his eyebrows exaggeratedly.

Mike just shakes his head, grinning in disbelief. "Well, probably against my better judgement, but I did promise so I'm getting it."

"Nice!" Richie says, grinning back.

Bill catches Stan eye's, and he raises his eyebrows. Bill shrugs. *What the hell, right?*

Stan grins, mirroring the gesture.

Stan has ended up drinking in the living room with Richie, spread out on two ends of the couch together. Bill and Mike are looking at something in the study, something Mike seemed very excited about – Stan might have followed them, but he was in the middle of a conversation with Richie. Also, he didn't think he could've actually gotten up even if he'd wanted to, because the alcohol was making him feel comfortable and sleepy. It still is, however long it's been since they left, he's not even sure.

He's been trying not to drink lately, self-imposed but both his therapist and the hospital counsellor thought it was a good idea. At dinner, he wasn't sure what would happen, and he didn't want to bum everyone out the first time they'd all gotten together in years. This – this feels different. This reminds him of the first times he ever started drinking, outside on the porch seat or the basement, one time at the clubhouse, and Richie was always there, making him roll his eyes, making him laugh.

“And she was just yelling at me, Richie, what do you have to say about this?” Richie laughs, putting on a shrill voice.

“And you, thought, now *this*, this is the time to do a funny voice, when the girl I’m dating is already pissed off with me –” Stan remembers, laughing too.

Richie throws his hands up. “That was all I had!” he says, but he’s laughing so hard he can barely get the words out.

“And she grabbed the glass and dumped the entire strawberry milkshake on you!” Stan continues, eyes streaming, and for a while they’re both laughing too hard to talk, tears rolling down their faces.

Richie takes his glasses off to wipe his eyes, still grinning. The living room is dimly lit, kind of warm and comfortable. Richie grins at him through the gloom.

“Shit, I missed you, Staniel Day Lewis,” he says, pressing his socked foot against Stan’s. Stan vaguely remembers him doing something similar like this when they were younger, easy and affectionate, movie nights and sleepovers, the restless energy of being kids. He had expected Richie to throw a silly name in there – no one has ever been so uncomfortable saying his earnest feelings without making a joke of it in some way.

“Haven’t heard that one since what, 1993? Remember *In The Name Of The Father*?” Stan muses, grinning.

Richie groans. “I *know*. In my defence, I didn’t *realise* it was mostly courtroom scenes.”

“Hey, I didn’t mind it. I just remember *you* being upset,” Stan retorts, smirking. “Although at least you got to stare at that guy for two hours.”

Richie throws a cushion at him. “Fuck you.”

Stan cackles. “Missed you too,” he says, quieter, still smiling.

A comfortable silence settles, just for a moment.

“God, I can’t even really believe tonight happened. I’ve really missed – I’ve really missed it,” Stan says, and he knows he’s probably a little drunk if he’s saying this. “I can’t believe everyone. It’s like – I don’t recognise you all and I would know you anywhere,” he says, looking at the ceiling. He takes his glasses off for a moment, and rubs his eyes. “Except Ben,” he says, with a chuckle. “That took me a moment.”

Richie laughs loudly at this. “God, right? Straight up thought Bev had brought a male model to dinner.”

Stan laughs. “I know right? I thought he had to be like, a professionally handsome stranger who accidentally came to the wrong room. Good for him, though,” he says, fondly. “He deserves it.”

Richie nods. “You come out to L.A, everyone looks like that. It’s enough to make you think about trying to get healthier, and then you think about gym bros and CrossFit and green smoothies and never eating anything fun again and it’s like, fuck that, where’s the closest In-N-Out?”

Stan grins. “Yeah, I don’t think I’d fit in.”

Richie laughs darkly. “Well, it’s a town of people with no end of fucked-up issues and more money than they know what to do with. They can’t get enough therapists.”

Stan laughs. “Noted. Do you ever see Bill there? He’s out there in Hollywood, right?”

“Oh, gee, *Hollywood*? With all the big *stars*?” Richie mocks.

Stan throws the cushion back at him, laughing. “Fuck you.”

Richie laughs. “Yeah he is, but apparently we don’t live near each other. I probably talked to him more tonight than I have the handful of times I’ve seen him in the last decade or so. Isn’t that a stupid fucking thing?”

Stan sighs. “Extremely fucking stupid, Rich. I mean that’s more than I have since our twenties, so no judgement here.” He thinks about it. “I

mean, he seems to have it all together. He looks good. And he hasn't become an entertainment-industry L.A. tool."

"Unlike me, you mean?" Richie snorts.

Stan chuckles. "Well, in your case you were always one, so it didn't hurt you to be there."

He dodges the cushion. "Fuck *you*," Richie says fondly. "I know he was joking about them making him officially old, but I think the grey streaks look good on him. Proseor – profsess – professorial. Fuck, you know."

Stan chuckles. "Yeah, it's very writerly. Distinguished."

"There's the word," Richie says animatedly. "And Bev. God, Bev."

"Mhm," Stan agrees, an affectionate sound. He thinks about her, the light breeze lifting strands of her hair around her in the parking lot, and her sad, clever, loving eyes. "I'm so glad she came," he says, and picks his glass up again. "I hope...I hope she's ok."

Richie makes a surprised sound, and looks at him. "You don't think so?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I hope she is...But she barely talked about her husband, not anything personal, not the way I would've about –" he cuts off, contemplating his glass, breathing. He takes a sip, then continues.

"I mean, then again Eddie didn't say much about his life, more than the basics. Maybe they just wanted to hear more about us." He grins. "He is, for one, exactly what I thought he'd be at this age."

Richie laughs. "God, I know. Of course he's in insurance."

Stan grins. "Yeah, I know. You certainly made fun of him enough for it tonight. Some might call it overkill."

"The way his face still does that scrunchy thing when he's upset? Amazing. I can't *not* make fun of him when that happens." Richie says with a laugh and a far-off look.

Stan smirks at him, regarding him over the top of his glass. "So...still, huh?"

Richie feigns ignorance. "Still *what*?" he says in a stupid voice, too big.

Stan gives him an unimpressed look. "Do you really want me to say it?"

Richie groans and drains his drink. "I'm really not drunk enough for this conversation."

Stan pushes back, clumsily drunk, against Richie's foot with his own. "I don't think you'll ever be, Rich."

Richie laughs, a tired, drunken chortle. "How do you know I'm not already over it? It's been over twenty years."

Stan chuckles, shrugging. "Maybe you have. But seeing you guys together again tonight, I could've sworn nothing had changed," he says, and takes another sip. "Also I had just the *strongest* urge to roll my eyes."

"Fuck you," Richie says, laughing, happier sounding. He sighs. "Ah, fuck."

"Yep," Stan agrees. He looks at Richie. "Does anyone else know?"

Richie looks up at the ceiling. "Nope, I was very stealthy."

Stan laughs, a surprised cackle. He doesn't know if any of them ever picked up on it as well, but it hadn't exactly been subtle if you were paying attention. The way Richie always had to be centre of attention if Eddie was around. The way they used to fight over dumb things, like who got to sit in the old hammock in the clubhouse, and ended up almost sitting in each other's laps – to spite each other, obviously.

"Hey, it's not my fault you just had a way of knowing everything," Richie protests, laughing.

"You didn't make it particularly hard," Stan says archly.

Richie flips him off.

“So,” Stan continues, looking at the ceiling, then back to him slowly.
“You gonna –“

“Gonna what?” Richie cuts him off.

Stan give him his patented “Your-bullshit-is-not-going-to-work-on-me-Tozier” look.

Amazingly, it actually works on Richie, even after all this time.

“What am I supposed to –“ Richie spurts out. “I mean – it’s not like I’m going to – anyway, he’s married. To a woman, I believe we established.”

Stan blows a raspberry. “What does that prove, necessarily? Also, you’ve heard of bisexuality, yes?”

Richie blows a raspberry back. “Fuck off, you know what I mean.” He’s unusually quiet for a moment. “Anyway it doesn’t matter. I’m totally fine with him never knowing how I felt. I’m not here for that anyway.” He presses Stan’s foot. “I’m here for you. You know I love you right?” he says, and then quieter, after a moment. “Fuck me, I’m drunk.”

Stan laughs, pressing back. “Love you too, Rich. Couldn’t imagine doing this without you.”

“No...back atcha, Staniel,” Richie says quietly, and then he’s asleep in the next few seconds.

Mike looks for the book he’d been talking about with Bill before, wondering how he even accumulated so many books. His study feels like a mess, suddenly, and he wonders why he doesn’t try to have a less chaotic workspace. Given that he spends a lot of time in here and in the living room marking essays on the Civil War and the Gulf War and every other war in between, he can understand how it got that way, anyway. Teenagers writing about history can make one feel a little chaotic.

He finds the book, and hears Bill say from the bookshelf, “Y-you have my books?”

He freezes, screws up his eyes for a moment and then turns around. “Yeah, a few,” he says, with a guilty smile. He has more than a few, clearly, and he keeps them in good condition.

Bill looks at him with something like wonder, smiling in a warm, drunken way. In the morning, Mike’s probably going to regret continuing to drink after coming home, but right now he’s appreciating the warm, happy, dizzy feeling of it. When was the last time he even did this? Going out with some of his colleagues once, a while ago? They’re not bad people, but they’re not his people. He’s spent so long not being with his people, and he’s not even sure why.

“Do you – do you like t-them?” Bill says, jokingly enough but in such a familiar way that Mike knows he’s honestly asking. “F-fucking stutter, Jesus,” he swears, with a rueful grin. “It’s b-being here that b-brings it out, I swear. I’m f-fine at home.”

Mike grins. “I don’t know, it’s kind of nice to hear it again. Reminds me of old times. And if I remember correctly, it always came out more when you drank.”

Bill laughs. “G-good times in d-dear old Derry.”

Mike shrugs. “Maybe it’s because I’m a *bit* drunk and sappy right now but...with you guys they were.”

Mike can’t tell because he’d opted to only turn on the lamp and not the ceiling light – too much light for being drunk this late at night – but he almost thinks he sees Bill’s eyes shining. “Yeah...they were,” he says and looks back at the bookshelf, maybe just for somewhere to look. “Y-you still haven’t told m-me what you think of m-my books... now I’m worried,” he says, grinning as he turns back. Mike can feel a thread of reality in his words, though.

Mike shakes his head, laughing. “No, no! I really like them! The *Attic Room* is gripping, and so is *Caroline*. I think that’s my favourite actually.”

Bill looks flattered. “Usually p-people say *The Attic Room*. It’s Audra’s favourite t-too. Which is fine, b-because I love that one t-too. But C-caroline’s always b-been one of my favourites. Maybe my favourite,” Bill looks at him with a smile, holding his glass up to take a sip. “It’s kind of nice to know that. You always got my stories back then, too.”

“They were so good! I’m honestly so thrilled you did something with that talent, man!” Mike says, happily.

Bill beams at him. “I d-don’t think I could have w-without your support. All of y-you.”

Mike nods, smiling. “You already had it though.”

Bill is pacing the length of the living room, which is never good. It means his thoughts – his feelings, as well, maybe – are too big to be confined to a sitting position.

“Stop pacing, I can’t concentrate,” Mike says, without looking up.

“Right, sure,” Bill says, and sits down, jiggling his leg nervously.

“Is he stress-pacing again?” Bev calls from the kitchen.

“He’s stopped. For now,” Mike calls back, turning a page.

“Good,” Bev calls, with a laugh in her voice. She’s making them hot drinks, which is very nice of her, but Mike’s starting to think maybe Bill should have done it – at least it would’ve given him something to do.

He finishes the last page of the story – probably classifiable as a short story, although it’s taken him the better part of an hour to read, and not because he was dragging his feet with it – and looks at it. The pages are typed on Bill’s old typewriter that his parents got from the second hand store on Main Street, and the ‘s’ key is slightly out of alignment, which gives it a unique look. Mike thinks it’s very Bill, somehow.

He looks up at Bill, who is doing a very bad job of acting calm, sitting in the old next to the couch.

“Bill,” he says, and Bill looks at him, looking paler than usual.

"It's f-fine if you hated it, M-mike. I mean, you could say that to m-me. I can take it. I know you're not doing this j-just to screw with m-me. I m-mean Richie w-would. And, not that it m-matters, but I'm not sure it's even f-finished yet –" he babbles, stutter coming out worse under stress. He winces.

Mike breaks into a smile. "If you'd let me get a word in, I'd say that I don't know what you're even on about, Bill – this is really good! I loved it!"

Bill lights up. "Really?"

Mike nods. "I think you should submit it to a paper, or something. I definitely think you should let everyone else read it. I think they'd all love it, man!"

Bill beams, relief almost leaking out of his pores, cascading off him in waves. "Well, B-bev's read it, too."

Mike grins. "See, what were you even worried about? I'm assuming she didn't throw it back in your face?"

Bill chuckles, a very relieved sound. "No, she said it w-was great, too."

Mike raises a quizzical eyebrow, smiling. "You didn't trust her?"

Bill colours, and shakes his head. "No – no! I always trust her op-pinion – " he looks down, embarrassed, and then looks back at Mike, smiling sheepishly. *"I just wanted another one," he says, and then lowers his voice. "Also – she's m-my girlfriend, she has to be nice."*

Mike shakes his head. "Bill, you're one of my best friends, and I care about you deeply, but I think we both know that's both ridiculous and not true. If she said she liked it, she was being honest with you," he says, quieter.

Bill nods. "I know, I'm b-being dumb. I d-don't want to be that guy who's like, taking a girl for granted. She m-means everything, she's my best friend."

"It happens," Mike says, grinning. "At least you know that."

Bill looks at him. "You don't think it's too scary?" he says, with a shadow of worry. "I mean after...shouldn't I just write things that are...n-nice?"

Mike thinks about it. "I think...you should do whatever you need to do to work through – what happened. If that's writing a better ending – controlling the...monster we faced –" he says slowly, and trails off. He takes a breath. "If you deal with it through writing, then I think write what helps you. Write in honour of him. If I could honour my parents like that I would."

Bill's eyes are watery, and he throws his arms around Mike's neck suddenly. Mike hugs him back. They're probably still more tactile, as a group, than other boys their ages but even they're less so now. Now that they're sixteen going on seventeen, now they really don't feel like kids anymore. Sometimes it feels strange to be so close.

"I knew you'd get it, Mike. That's w-why I wanted you to b-be one of the first to read it," Bill says quietly, as he lets him go.

"You thought it was that good, huh?" Bev says, coming through and they laugh and jump up to take the hot drinks. She beams at Bill, but catches Mike's eyes briefly, as if to ask – is everything ok? Is he ok? To which he replies, hopefully, yes, I think it is. I think he is, and he will be.

Bill looks at him, smile turning shrewder, over his glass. "So do y-you like the endings?"

Mike hedges. Except on occasion, like the first story he ever let Mike read, Bill has always had a problem with endings. If he was Stan, he might say this possibly belies his own personal inability to deal with endings in his own life properly – him and Bev having problems in senior year comes to mind – but he isn't, so he won't speak to that.

"I mean...I never really want your stories to end, so –" he tries, and Bill cracks up and then he does.

"You think they're bad too?" Bill says, wiping his eyes, still sort of laughing.

Mike shrugs looking for the right words. "I just – you're so good at the set-up, and you write such heartfelt, interesting characters but

sometimes it just feels like you...run out of steam, or get – tired, or something,” he ends up saying.

Bill shakes his head, still grinning, a little more rueful now. “I get that a lot, actually. Audra said it in our last argument. I mean, not dramatically, it just came up...” he says, taking a sip of his drink. Mike doesn’t miss the slight bitterness in his expression, talking about her.

He’s never met Audra – from what Bill told him tonight, he’s been married for the past six years to her, an actress, and that he met her at a party probably hosted by someone famous that Mike cannot remember the name of. He didn’t speak about her a lot, but when he did he said she was talented and funny and passionate – but with a hint of that same bitterness to it. It’s not like Eddie’s point-blank near refusal to discuss his wife at all, other than the facts – Bill clearly still loves her, but it definitely seems complicated. He can’t imagine being married to a celebrity makes things easy either.

“How’d she...take you leaving to come down here? I mean, isn’t there a movie you’re writing for that she’s in?” Mike asks carefully.

Bill looks at him strangely for a moment, then nods. “I mean, she was...fine. Well, we were kind of in the m-middle of a thing, and it didn’t r-really get r-resolved. But the m-movie doesn’t need me f-for a couple of days. And I can w-work from here.”

Mike nods. *Fine* doesn’t sound like the word for it, but how would he know?

“And you guys are...ok? Happy?” he asks, knowing he’s edging into dangerous territory, alcohol making him a little too bold.

Bill laughs, a surprised, bitten-off sound. “Is anyone?” he says, almost jokingly but there’s an exhausted edge seeping into it. “No, I – it’s hard to explain.” He sighs. “It’s not like w-we’re not – crazy about each other in some w-ways, but it’s just – w-we drive each other crazy in other w-ways, too. I’m n-not sure we...get each other. Not like...” he says, trailing off, staring awkwardly at his empty glass.

Mike knows what he means without him even saying it. This thing

between them all – this awful thing that brought them together, this horrible tragedy, this beautiful connection that blossomed despite all of that like greenery coming back after a hurricane – it’s a blessing and a curse, and it always has been. How are they supposed to move on, bring new people into their lives who don’t understand them, when – somewhere in the world, once upon a time – there was a group of people who already did without all of the painful explaining of yourself? It’s probably why his scant attempts at relationships haven’t lasted so long – that and the difficulty of trying to find someone you can date in the small town you’ve always lived in, especially someone that doesn’t work with you.

He thinks for a moment, then speaks up. “Look, you can tell me to shut up because it’s obvious, or I’m out of line, if you want but – you know it’s not fair to judge her against Bev, right? Or any of us, really.”

Bill looks at him, and for a moment Mike thinks he’s actually angry, but then he just looks away and sighs deeply. “F-fuck, I’m s-so aware of it, t-though.” He looks at Mike. “I don’t know h-how to...not.”

Mike nods. “Does she...know? About Georgie? About...*him*?” he asks, very quietly. It’s been twenty-seven years and he still doesn’t like saying the name if he can help it. It’s like an ancient curse, like Bloody Mary, like that movie *Candyman* that Richie dragged him to and he hated (well, it was more complicated than just hated – how do you make peace with being such a rarity where you live, and not always a welcome one, and then you watch one of those awful slasher movies, but instead of seeing no one like you as usual, you look like the killer? Are you happy to see yourself or terrified that people think you’re the monster?)

Bill’s eyes get teary again, and Mike wishes it didn’t make him want to comfort him quite so much. He’d been through so much – they’d all been through so much. He used to see it in them, and just wanted to hug it out of them, take all their secret pains for them.

He swallows. “H-how –“ he begins, but his voice breaks. “H-how can I?” he gets out, and then breaks off. “I d-don’t k-know even –“ he starts, and begins to cry, and Mike hopes that Bill still wants to be hugged by him.

He does. They stay like that for a moment. Bill looks strangely abashed and pink when they break apart.

“F-fucking hell, I’m drunk,” he says, laughing a little awkwardly. “I should p-probably crash.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, I’ll show you the spare room. I’m assuming Richie’s passed out on my couch at this point. I definitely remember one Christmas break where he did so for like a week, back in college,” Mike says, talking too much. Bill laughs, a little oddly.

Bill turns to leave the study, but looks back at Mike. “Thanks. I’ve missed your – y-your hugs, Mike,” he says, with a tired little smile.

“Missed you too,” Mike says, smiling, head buzzing in a tired kind of way.

Stan wakes up on the couch, feeling the onset of the hangover approaching. He can’t have been out too long because the warm living room light is still on, although Richie’s passed out at the other end of the couch.

He sits up too fast and swears a little, and looks around to see Mike going to turn the light off, and almost jumps a foot.

“Jesus fuck, man,” he says, trying to get his heart rate back to normal.

Mike looks guilty. “Oh sorry, I was trying not to wake you up.”

He shakes his head, smiling a little shamefacedly, breathing in and out in measured breaths. “No, it’s fine I was just a bit, y’know, disoriented.”

He gets up, carefully avoiding bumping Richie. He doesn’t know why – when they were young he could have slept through an earthquake in the middle of a parade, and it doesn’t seem like much has changed there.

“Good catch up?” Mike asks, looking over at Richie fondly.

Stan nods, grinning. “Yeah. Can’t believe he’s here and asleep on your couch.”

Mike returns the grin. “Honestly, still can’t believe *you’re* here and were asleep on my couch.”

Stan smiles slowly, still drunk enough to make Mike’s face a little in and out of focus. His head is starting to really fucking hurt though.

“God,” he says, taking off his glasses and rubbing his temples.

Mike looks worried. “Are you ok?”

He shakes his hands. “Mm, yeah. Could do with some aspirin though, I can feel this hangover chasing me down.”

Mike thinks for a second, and then says. “I know where I’ve got some. I’m pretty sure it’s in my ensuite though,” he says, and Stan should probably just stay in the living room, but he follows Mike instead, still wanting to talk to him.

Mike doesn’t seem to mind.

“So, where’s Bill?” he asks. “I’m glad he came too,” he says slowly, smiling, looking at the things on Mike’s walls. So many books, and old maps, and framed historical posters on the walls. “I like your house. It’s very...I don’t know, you.”

Mike chuckles, softly. “Thanks, I think? Bill crashed in the spare bedroom.” He looks at Stan, “Which I’m sorry to say, is probably where you’re going to have to sleep tonight.”

Stan grins wider. “Well unless he’s started snoring, I think I can handle it.”

“I have no idea if he has, but I guess that’s your cross to bear,” Mike says, and Stan shakes his head, grinning.

“Asshole. What book were you guys so jazzed about earlier?” he asks Mike.

Mike lights up. “This book about the Romanov family, it’s brilliant.

Although I think Bill fell asleep before I remembered to give it to him.”

Mike opens the door to his room and leaves it open, going in and turning on a standing lamp, so Stan continues into the room with him. The bedroom is relatively small, or maybe it just looks that way because there are books in here too, and a neat double bed and a stack of papers on the bedside table. A door off to the side must contain the ensuite.

Mike gives it all a cursory look, slightly awkward, then looks back at Stan and seems to remember why he came in. “Aspirin,” he says, and goes to open the side door. He leaves it open and the warm, too-bright light of the bathroom spills into the dimness of the bedroom.

“You have *so many books*, man, I love it,” he calls, sitting down on the edge of the bed. It’s softer than he expected, feels good. Maybe Mike’s got that kind of quality mattress Stan was always telling himself was too expensive. “Do you have Bill’s?”

“Uh, of course,” Mike says, with a laugh, voice muffled because he’s facing the sink in the bathroom. “He saw them in the study, too. Hope it didn’t come off too creepy.”

“Nonsense!” Stan says, with a slow laugh. “I’m sure he was thrilled. I mean, I have them all too. Patricia’s obsessed with them...” he trails off. He thinks about her curled up on their couch reading *The Attic Room*, bringing her cups of tea, “*sorry I can’t talk to you until I finish this, Adelaide’s being chased* –“ and closes his eyes. He lies back, just for a moment, and opens his eyes.

Mike is giving him a strange, sad look but he looks away almost immediately when he realises Stan is awake. He’s holding the aspirin bottle and a glass of water. He smiles reassuringly, but it’s still there behind his eyes. “I opened the bottle for you. I wasn’t sure if you could do it right now,” he says, with a hint of humour.

This works, because he finds himself smiling. “I can’t believe you could. You’ve had as much as I’ve had.”

Mike chuckles, handing him the bottle and placing the water on the

nightstand. “Well, I’m taller.”

“Shut up,” Stan chuckles too, sitting up, swiping clumsily at him. He takes the pill, holds it on his tongue, washes it down with the water. He thinks about his other pills, about watching them disappear down the toilet a week – two weeks? – before. Before it happened. Bad idea. They’re in his bathroom cabinet now. His parents’ old bathroom. He felt weird moving into their room, but his old room was too small, and it was too weird and depressing to move back into his childhood bedroom as an adult.

Before he knows it, he’s horizontal again. This mattress *is* really good. Maybe he will have to ask Mike about it.

“I guess you’re kind of rooted to the spot there, huh?” Mike says softly, and he’s smiling.

He shakes his head. “I’ll get up... just give me a moment. Just sit – sit with me for a second. I don’t want to have to keep looking up at you, my eyelids are too heavy.”

“Oh, ok, uh – “ Mike says, that edge of awkwardness creeping back into his voice. Stan shakes his head against the coverlet, patting the space next to him drunkenly. “Come on now,” he says, looking up at the ceiling.

He feels Mike sit down on the edge of the bed, somewhere to his left, and then feels the familiar sag of a mattress supporting two adults.

“Thankyou,” he says. “I’ll get up in a moment, just waiting till the ceiling stops spinning.”

Mike chuckles, and Stan can almost feel it. Or maybe he’s just drunkenly imagining it. “I haven’t been drunk like this in a while.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I was in college the last time I did this,” Stan replies, grinning up at the ceiling.

Mike laughs. “I can’t say that long for me. You know how they say cops can drink? Teachers are like that but we also have to spend a lot of time trying to get teens interested in things they don’t care about, so. Lot of incentive to.”

Stan chuckles again. "I had no idea. Amazing."

Mike laughs, too.

Stan turns his head to look at him. He remembers Mike in his twenties, and vaguely in his thirties, and he looks sort of the same but he's got wrinkles at his eyes. When did it shift? When did they actually start aging?

He turns back to watch the ceiling, and then has to close his eyes because it's still moving. "Thanks for bringing everyone back, Mikey," he says softly. "I can't believe you got them all to come...I had a great night. I haven't felt this good in..." he trails off.

His hand is next to Mike's. Softly, so softly, like he might be drunkenly imagining this too, he feels someone touching their fingertips to his.

He presses back, warm at that point of connection, imagining it flowing up into his stomach, his heart, his brain. He's so tired, and it's so comfortable. Just a minute more, then he'll get up.

*

Stan wakes up by himself, disoriented, not wearing his glasses. His mouth feels like cotton.

He sits up too fast, and swears. His head hurts, but he vaguely remembers taking aspirin last night, so that's probably why his head doesn't completely feel like someone's dropped a heavy iron safe on it.

He realises he's still wearing his clothes from last night, and that he slept on top of the covers. Someone's put a soft blanket on him. *Mike*. This is Mike's room. He fell asleep on Mike's bed, he realises with some shame. He shouldn't have lain down, he shouldn't have even sat down.

Mike's put out a new glass of water and left the aspirin on the bedside table. He's not here, but he's left a note on a scrap of paper, next to Stan's glasses. Stan puts them on to read it.

Gone out for coffee, assuming the others haven't left when you get up, tell them I'm bringing them back drinks too. Mike :) P.S. stop feeling guilty I slept here too, I just get up early.

Stan stares at the note for a moment, smiling stupidly, then remembers that Bill and Richie are here somewhere, and wonders what time it is. He wonders if his phone is still in his pocket – it is, thankfully. It says it's 8:13am, so based on long ago precedent, the both of them are almost certainly not awake.

As if on cue, his phone rings.

Patricia.

He hesitates for a moment, then picks it up.

"Stan? I didn't wake you up did I?" she says, friendly but awkward. It's like this every time they talk now, especially the last few weeks.

"No, no I'm up," he replies, in the same way, friendly enough so she won't think he's being distant.

"Good," she says, genuinely. "It's afternoon here, but I didn't want to bother you too early," she says, and pauses, and he can imagine her face right now. Concerned, gentle. "How are you? How's the house going? Did you get to see everyone yet?" she says, and laughs that little awkward laugh. He can picture the way her face changes when she does it, the crinkle of her eyes. "I'm sorry, too many questions, sorry."

He scrunches up his eyes, and opens them, and then summons his friendly voice. "No, no, thanks," he says, smiling despite himself. "I'm good. Well, I'm feeling better. I think it's the air here. That sounds dumb," he says, and laughs.

"No, no, sounds good!" she says, laughing a little.

"I did get to see everyone last night. It was – It was so good. I don't know why we didn't do something like this...years ago," he adds, remembering it happily.

"I'm really glad," Patricia says, sounding genuinely pleased. "I knew

it'd be good for you to be back, with them," she says, and pauses. A breath transmitted across an ocean of space between them. "Kind of wish I'd met more of them."

He pauses. "I – me too," he says, too heavily but he can't help it.

She breathes again. "Tell that – Mike – thanks from me. He's been the one helping you, right?"

"Yeah, he – is," he says.

"He's a good friend. I always liked him, when we got to see him," she says, quietly.

He pauses, takes a breath. "Thanks, I will. L –" he says, catches himself almost ending the call the way they always used to. "Look out for yourself. I hear it's cold over there."

She takes another one in return. "Yeah, you too. Rug up. Don't get sick," she says, and she's starting to sound like she has a cold. "I'm really sorry, I have to go, but you know you can call if you need? I don't care about the time difference. I just – I just like to know how you're doing."

He closes his eyes and opens them again. "I know, and thanks. Same to you, really, I'm sure what you're doing is way more interesting."

There's a pause, where they used to put their love yours, their honeys, all those things you don't think about until you do. "It really isn't," she says instead. "Look after yourself. Say hi to Mike from me."

"Will do. You look after yourself, too, Pat." He can't say it – neither of them can just casually throw it around anymore, it's not fair – but he does, so much.

"I will. Bye, hon," she says, slipping up.

He doesn't call her on it. "Bye, Pat."

They hang up, and he sighs, lying back and looking at the ceiling, a blurry sense memory of something buzzing in his fingertips.

Notes for the Chapter:

the title of the chapter and the song Bill and Richie are drunk-singing is this: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_Cf6pgwm0I (also on the playlist)

3. I Get By (With A Little Help From My Friends)

Ben wakes early, despite how late he got to bed the night before. It's something he realised once he really started doing early starts, interning for his first architecture firm – it's hard to reset your body clock to waking up later, even when you really want to.

He doesn't have nearly as much of a splitting headache as he'd feared, maybe because he had the foresight yesterday to drink water and take the Panadol he had with him. He still takes another to get on top of it, and gets ready for a jog.

He much prefers to jog around his home in Seattle, or to use the treadmill when he's pressed for time, which is almost all the time. But when he gets a chance to jog outside, he loves the scenery, the crisp air, the trees on his street.

He laces up his shoes, quietly slips downstairs and walks out the front, leaving his water bottle on the porch to come back to later. He centres himself, and starts off.

Jogging is such a rush of endorphins to him, it's like a drug. It makes him feel limitless, like there's nothing that can touch him as long as he keeps moving.

It's just him and his breathing and his music.

Come up for air, come up for up air, come up.

He used to hate running. So much. It was like a torture someone had devised specifically to hurt and humiliate him. He hadn't felt like he could run from anything then – and yet he had, run for his life. Literally.

Derry's streets are written with old memories – riding around on bikes with everyone, lazy summer afternoons, kicking leaves in autumn, shivering home in winter.

All alone and I know I can't stay/But we're walking up and down the streets to stay awake.

Before he knows it, he's jogging past a familiar series of houses that he can't quite place until he sees it. The old green-and-white house. Bill's house.

Not his house anymore. Not even his parents' anymore.

He hadn't realised he'd run this far. Seeing the house has winded him, and he leans forward, bracing his hands on his thighs and trying to catch his breath.

He must have been a kid the last time he was this unexpectedly winded.

He's trying to draw breath into his lungs but they feel like they're on fire, like all he's doing is burning his throat, burning his lungs. He's vaguely aware that he's lying down, feeling the grass scratching his back through his shirt. He can barely see, hallucinating burnt out spots on his vision. The sun is too high, too hot, too bright, so he closes his eyes again.

He also wants the ground to swallow him whole, to be able to open his eyes and see that everyone's left him here to go get changed, onto their next class. But no such luck.

High school is cruel.

"You're weak, Hanscom! You're not going to keep up in the real world!"

He can make out Coach Orlovsky's harsh tone, distantly, but right now he can't even concentrate on it.

"That's t-totally unfair, C-coach!" he can distantly hear Bill saying, furiously.

"He needs to go to the nurse, you made him pass out with those insane laps!" Stan jumps in, just as angrily

"Ben? Ben?" Eddie's panicked voice is closer to him. "Can you hear me?" he says, moving into the same taking-charge tone he had when he patched up the wound Bowers had made, the first time they met

"You kids think you're special, well I got news for you – I'm not treating you different because you somehow managed not to get murdered in that

old house! Just because you got some attention from the paper! You wouldn't have been welcome back in my house, no sir!" Orlovsky sneers, and even this is abrasive and loud and somewhere in the part of his brain that is subsisting on what little oxygen he's getting he's so sick and angry about it.

"Like anyone would want to spend five seconds in your creep dungeon, you fucking fascist!" Richie snaps, and the tone is mocking but without any of his usual warmth, he's maybe even more white-hot with rage than the rest of them.

He hears a chorus of distant oohs and a few laughs.

"You're going to the office, now, Tozier, and you're going to rot there!" Orlovsky roars at Richie.

He opens his eyes and sees Eddie's big scared eyes. "Mm...ok..." he gasps out, and Eddie nods and looks anxiously at Richie.

Stan and Bill are standing protectively around him, and he can't see their faces but what he can see of their bodies is angry, like they're vibrating with indignation and rage. Richie is next to them, closest to the coach and Ben can see his face a little better.

Richie looks almost as angry as the time he'd picked up a baseball bat and swung it at the head of serial-child-killer who was nearly twice his size. Ben wouldn't want to be anywhere near the receiving end of it. He stares defiantly back at Coach Orlovsky, who is maybe two feet in front of him.

"I'm taking my friend to the nurse, and then I'll go to the office myself. That wasn't a request." Richie says, with steely confidence.

"W-we're coming with you," Bill says, matter-of-factly. Like he's just keeping it together, but any longer and he'll start swearing at the coach too. Eddie and Stan make agreeing noises.

Richie turns to Ben, ignoring the coach's furious splutters, and his expression softens, though he doesn't smile. He offers Ben a hand up, and allows him to put an arm around his shoulder, while Bill takes the other and all of them walk out of class and off the sports field together.

"Sorry you got in trouble for me," Ben says, at the nurse's office, feeling

remorseful and humiliated. If only he'd have been able to finish those laps, but it was just so hot he couldn't keep it up.

Richie makes a disgusted noise, and for a moment Ben is worried he's going to yell at him. But he just shakes his head. "It was - definitely not - fucking - your fault, Ben. I've been waiting for the right moment to yell at that psycho for years... It's worth the detention any day just to see his stupid guppy face flapping around and trying to figure out how to stop us leaving."

He does a cruel and accurate impression, and all the boys laugh. Even Ben, who only coughs a little bit after.

"Are you sure you don't have asthma? Maybe you should get tested?" Eddie starts again, and Richie groans.

"I'll test you in a second," he threatens half-heartedly, and Eddie replies, "That doesn't even make sense, idiot, and it's a legitimate question -"

Ben smiles a little, and really hopes he's not going to cry. He was very close to it back in class, and that would have been so much worse. He's just happy that these boys would drop what they were doing to help him, even though he knows they would, it doesn't stop surprising him.

"No I don't think I have asthma, but thanks, Ed. But if the Nurse sends me home early like she said, someone will need to take Mike the Chem homework I was going to bring him."

"What a day for him to be sick, huh? I reckon Orlovsky might not have tried it if he was around. I think he's scared of him," Richie crows, grinning viciously. Ben doesn't know if it's true but he grins anyway.

"I'll take it, that w-way I'll just go all the w-way b-back with Bev instead of t-turning off at mine," Bill says, and Ben feels an unpleasant twinge at the thought Bill recounting the story of him pathetically fainting and near-blackening out in gym to Bev, no matter how kind he is in the telling.

Ben looks back at Bill's house and squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, and opens them again. Bill really had been such a good friend, and that made the whole situation so much worse.

He turns, puts his music back in again and jogs back the way he

came, focusing hard on his music and his breathing. Trying not to remember streets with houses he'd been to a party at, that they'd trick-or-treated at.

Every time you try/Quarter half a mile/Just like yesterday/I told you I would stay

He finds his way back to the guest house, and as he reaches the porch he realises someone is pacing the porch, speaking in a quick-frustrated-quiet tone.

"Yes I'm aware of that – No, I – yes, Myra, I *heard you the first time* – I have to go, I'll call you later –" Eddie says, looking wound-up and sickly. He punches the screen with his finger rather forcefully, looks up, and almost physically jumps.

"Oh, Ben, it's you," he says, too quickly. It's almost like he's been sprung doing something he shouldn't be doing. He looks at Ben's sweat-soaked shirt and shorts, and his eyes narrow suspiciously.

"Did you seriously just go for a run?" he says, sounding both confused and irritable.

Ben shrugs. "I always go for a morning jog."

Eddie sighs. "Yeah, most mornings I do, too. Not usually when I have a hangover though, Jesus!" he says, almost like he's offended by the very concept.

Ben smiles. "Yeah I took some painkillers earlier, but honestly nothing clears my mind more than going for a jog. You're welcome to come tomorrow, if you want."

Eddie looks mollified by this. "Yeah I mean as long as we stay sober tonight, I'm in."

Ben goes to sit on the steps, picking up the water bottle he'd left and taking a big swig. "When'd you start, then?"

Eddie looks surprised by the question. "I, uh...maybe ten years ago? Just after I met Myra, I guess," he says, and his expression turns brooding.

From the look of that call, it doesn't sound good. But then again, what would he know about healthy relationships? With no wife or anyone, really, to speak of?

Ben just nods. "So you decided to get in shape for her?"

Eddie doesn't smile. "I guess," he says, looking down. "Also, I read this article about how your bones are weakening from the age of thirty onwards and exercise like jogging is good for cardiovascular health, and minimising your risk of developing osteoporosis –" he says, and he's off in an easier track, and they're discussing exercise and marathons and Ben's just decided not to bring up Myra again because clearly it's a sore spot for him, when Eddie pauses in their conversation and looks out at the tree in front of the guest house. "You know, I think you just have to have an outlet. Some time that isn't just work or – I mean, when I'm not working, I'm at home with Myra and sometimes you just need like, an hour where it's just you and seeing how far you can get before you go back," he says, with a strange look on his face.

Ben doesn't know what to say to this, that won't betray what he thinks. He might not have any relationships currently, he might not have always had the healthiest relationships before, but even he knows there's no way that this marriage is a happy one. Which makes him incredibly sad for Eddie, and too afraid to say anything about it. He hasn't even seen him since the nineties, what is he gonna do, start giving him marriage advice?

"Yeah, uh, of all people, I definitely know how important that time is. Getting a good work-life mental health balance," he starts, trying to find something easy to agree with. "Although admittedly, mine tends to skew in favour of work stuff," he says, smiling ruefully.

Eddie smiles a little. "Well, I'd kind of expect it to. You said you owned the company right?" he says, still a bit incredulous.

Ben nods, caught between his well-honed instinct to downplay it and his genuine pride in it. "I mean, it's only seven years old. Or it will be, in a month. But yeah, it took a lot of work in the industry to get there, and then get it up and running, so it was kind of all I thought about for a while."

Eddie shakes his head. "Sounds kind of exciting though, even if it was a lot of work...Man, Dark Horse Ben strikes again. Slow and steady, out here secretly building a business empire while we're all just working. It's just like when you knocked me off the top spot in AP Math in eleventh grade all over again."

Ben laughs, surprised. "You're still mad about that? It's been twenty-three years!"

"I'm just saying, you're cunning," Eddie says, but he laughs too.

Eddie's morning is getting better. It had started pretty fucking badly, to be fair, so there wasn't a lot of places for it to go.

He'd woken up with a splitting hangover – which he'd expected, because he didn't drink like that in his normal life. In fact, he was struggling to remember the last time he had – crazily, insurance agents aren't exactly hard partiers. College maybe? Couldn't be. But when else would he have let loose around anyone else?

So that had been horrible, but of course he'd brought a range of painkillers, because he liked to be prepared for any eventuality and guess who's laughing now *Richie*, he probably had a bad one and hadn't brought anything.

He hadn't been drunk around *Richie* in so long, he'd forgotten what it was like, being goaded into doing stupid things. *Arm-wrestling*. God. That post-drunk shame settled in, whispering at him that he'd been out of control, too much.

And as if that hadn't been hard enough, he'd been almost out the door to go into town and get some coffee when his phone had rung. *Myra*. Of course it had been her. Worse, he'd dodged a bunch of calls from her last night, so leaving it any longer would only make it worse when he eventually did talk to her again.

Myra had been stressed, anxious, saying something about Maine weather and to look out for a storm front and maybe he should just come back early. He'd had to pretend he had to go just because he

couldn't deal with trying to explain any more why he couldn't just leave right now.

He and Ben have been having a good conversation, when Bev comes downstairs, finding them outside. Ben lights up, and Eddie wonders for a brief second what it would be like to have someone look like that when he enters a room.

"I suspect the coffee here, if it exists, is terrible," she says, with a wry laugh. "Not that town's might be any better, but do you guys wanna chance it with me?"

"Give me ten minutes to shower, and I'm in," Ben says, with a self-conscious smile, getting up. Eddie wonders what he has to be self-conscious about.

Bev nods, grinning, and sitting down in his vacated spot. "Alright, hurry up then, I need a monster hit of caffeine quick."

He smiles at her, and Eddie thinks it's impossible that he still feels the same way, but it also seems impossible to him that she can't see it.

"Did he seriously go for a jog this morning?" she asks Eddie disbelievingly, as soon as he's run off, settling into his vacated seat on the step.

Eddie shakes his head. "I know, apparently he's a cyborg now."

She laughs. "Madness."

He grins.

"So, how are you doing this morning, then?" Bev asks.

Eddie frowns. "Well, if it weren't for heavy-duty Panadol, I would be lying on the floor, and my wife is worried I'm going to die in a storm here maybe? But other than that, fine."

Bev raises an eyebrow. "Does she know you've faced worse than a bit of thunder and lightning?"

Eddie looks away. "Not exactly. It would just freak her out. She gets very anxious."

Bev nods. "Yeah, I get that," she says.

A beat passes. "Does yours know?" he asks, looking at her.

This time she looks away, focusing on the cars out front. "I mean – Tom and I have talked about a lot in our pasts, but...I just. Well, same as you. I don't want to worry him. It was so long ago."

He recognises that deflection with a sinking feeling. She doesn't refer to Tom much, barely talked about him last night.

"Yeah...long time ago," he agrees.

He's thirteen, and basically under house arrest until the end of time for making his mom come down to the police station, and for going into the old crack house on Neibolt St, and for going into the sewers, and for getting very dirty. And for almost being killed and possibly cannibalised by a serial killer, but honestly, Eddie doesn't know what she thinks is worse.

What little colour he has in his life has leached out, and it's almost the end of summer, and he hasn't seen his friends in weeks. His life is just being at home all day, unless he's accompanying Mom to the shops because she won't let him out of her sight and she won't let him go by himself anymore. And more pills. "For the terrible ordeal you've been through, Eddie-bear," she says, too nicely, and they make him feel tired and colourless, like you could see through him. A little see-through boy, made of glass.

He just lies back on his bed, listening to the tape Richie made for him. Richie had a surprisingly mature taste in music, for a kid with such an immature sense of humour. They had to sneak him this cassette player, Bill and Richie, before the summer started, because his mom didn't approve of him listening to rock music – which she often referred to as 'devil music'.

He's played this one song over and over, so much that he's probably about to wear out the tape.

"Oh we can beat them forever and ever/then we can be heroes, just for

one day” David Bowie sings, and it opens up some part of him that hurts over what they went through and desperately misses them all.

It had felt like that, heroes but just for one day. Then back to normal, but worse.

Someone is knocking on his window. He sits up, realising he’s fallen asleep and the tape is no longer playing. He stops it, pulling his headphones off.

He goes over to the window, and he sees a flash of red hair, and then he realises he’s looking at Bev through the glass.

She’s smiling, mischievously. He has no idea why.

“What are you doing here?” he whispers. “If my mom sees you here –“

Bev shakes her head, still smiling. “We’re getting you out of house arrest. Richie and I have a plan, if you’ll agree to it.”

He glances back at his closed bedroom door, beyond which his mother is either lying on the couch watching TV, or sitting at the little plastic-topped table in the kitchen cutting coupons.

He looks back at her, uneasy but also barely daring to hope. “Ok...what have you got.”

She smiles at him, excited, and he feels suddenly incredibly grateful for her presence. Not in love with her (he knows that much to be true), not staring longingly after her like Ben, but just grateful she’s here and she cares about him.

They end up walking over to the Chinese restaurant first, when they remember Ben left his car there. Eddie is surprised it hasn’t been towed, they hadn’t even thought about that in their drunken state last night, although between drunk driving and getting your car towed, he knows which he would prefer any day.

Driving around, they find a newish-looking café near the main part of the shops, and even Eddie has to admit that it’s cleaner and more modern than he’d expected. But maybe his memories embellish

everything in town as older and less hygienic than it actually was.

They find a table out of the sun, inside, and drink coffees that actually aren't too bad. The barista looks like she's gonna cry when he asks if they have almond milk, so he just gets soy instead.

"How do you think Stan's doing?" Eddie says, a while into a fairly easy conversation they'd been having about the best coffee spots in their cities, Eddie getting into a playful squabble with Bev about the best cafes in NYC and lamenting how often their favourites seemed to go under and be replaced.

Bev and Ben look at him, and he supposes the question is jarring but it's been on his mind for the last two days. Actually, for the last few days, ever since Mike called him, some kind of swirling anxiety that he doesn't know what he should be doing in this situation, but he should be doing something. *Oh well*, he thinks, *add it to the ever-growing list*.

"He seemed...I don't know, happier, last night?" Ben tries. The worry has returned to his eyes too. "But I guess, I haven't really been around people who've tried to..." he trails off and looks at his coffee.

"No, I think last night was good," Bev agrees. She looks at Ben, and then looks back at Eddie. "But, you know, I think it's ok to be worried, Ed. I think we're all worried. He smiled a lot, but he did look like he'd been through the wringer," she says. "I think we all remember what that looks like."

They share a knowing look. Ben nods. Eddie frowns at the memory. He doesn't really think about it, when he's at home. It's harder not to when he's back here.

She gives them an empathetic smile. "But he's...still here, you know? So we just have to be here for him for awhile. That's all we can do."

Eddie sees the way Ben looks at her as she says this. He wonders if Ben's even aware of how much affection for her leaks out of him, like a tap that's stuck and can't be turned off. It's almost irritating, it's so public, it's so obvious, why isn't he afraid everyone will see he still has that much affection for her? But he can't hate it. It's just who he

is.

“As long as it takes,” Ben says, determinedly.

Bev nods. “Definitely.”

Eddie nods, even though it’s not like he can be here forever, even if he wanted to be. It’s just lucky he’s such an asset to the company he works for, and almost never takes consecutive vacation days – they’d pretty much had to agree, when he’d explained the gravity of the situation.

“That’s all we can do,” Eddie repeats. He looks at Bev, grateful for her presence in an oddly familiar way that takes him a moment to place. Well, it’s not a specific memory, but he’d forgotten the exact feeling of it, the comfort. “Thanks, Bev.”

She reaches out, and squeezes his hand with hers, just briefly. And he’d forgotten she used to do that, or how comforting that was. Being back is like opening up a whole room he’d forgotten was locked, a whole back-catalogue of memories he can’t remember forgetting, wondering how he’d lived like these weren’t a vital part of him.

“Anytime,” she says, smiling.

They find their way back to a lighter topic of conversation soon enough, discussing last night, which turns into trying to piece together their blurrier memories with the help of various blurry photos and badly-angled videos on their phones.

“Hey, ok, but I’m sure I have a better picture of it, that will prove –“

Eddie is defending an appearance he’s made in the back of one of Bev’s photos, to Ben’s laughter and Bev’s mock-indignation, by scrolling through his own photos when he comes across a photo of him and Richie that he’d forgotten they’d taken. The lower lighting of the room they were in and the fish-tank cast weird shadows and lighting on their faces, and they look ridiculous and drunk – but they’re smiling so easily, and they look so comfortable that Eddie almost doesn’t recognise himself. He looks so *happy*. He just stares at it.

Seeing Richie last night was such a surreal experience that if he didn't have these pictures , he almost wouldn't believe it had happened. There was a time where his presence was just a matter of fact, immutable, like certain laws of physics. And then there were times where he wished that weren't the case, and times he was deeply grateful for this annoying kid with his stupid voices and his terrible jokes and his need to take things too far. And then suddenly, it wasn't like that.

He'd missed all of them , in varying ways. It would hit at random times, studying flashcards and remembering how Ben was great at making them and how he was great to study with because he got it, how to collaborate and how to work in companionable silence, and didn't get bored and grab your ear or your nose and make it *impossible* to do any work. Walking behind a laughing, red-haired girl on the way into the subway, but it wasn't Bev. Seeing his roommate's cartoons and being reminded of Bill drawing in his Math notebook. Someone reading a book on the train that he and Stan had been obsessed with. Walking past a theatre showing Mike's favourite movie.

And it wasn't like he didn't talk to them, and he even saw them on rare occasions when they were in the same place at the same time, and that was good. Not enough, but good. But Richie had been such a loud presence in his life. It had felt like his ears were always ringing when he started freshman year, waiting for Richie to yell something obnoxious or throw something at him. And then he'd stopped seeing Richie at all, and he'd forgotten what it felt like – infuriating and loud and embarrassing and funny and exciting all at the same time.

He looks at Richie in the photo. Older now, obviously, but so very much the way he remembered him. Annoying as hell.

He smiles a little, and almost drops his phone when it vibrates with a series of texts. From Richie. Of course they fucking are.

are you as hgunover as I am eds?

pronb took your aspirin like a goodf boy.

do your still have a fanny pack?

fuck anyway stan says yr welcome foe lunch 🤔

He shakes his head.

Congratulations, that was almost completely illegible. He pauses, then adds, **Also, for the millionth time, don't call me Eds.**

"Eddie?" He hears, and almost drops his phone again. He looks up, and Bev looks curious but doesn't say anything. "We're doing lunch at Stan's, alright? Just got off the phone with him."

He nods. "Uh yeah, sounds good."

Ben looks curious too, but neither of them follow up.

"Ben and I were thinking of picking up some other stuff for lunch, do you wanna come? Otherwise, you're welcome to meet them there," she continues, casually.

He glances at Ben, who looks a little too casual, and decides to give him some time without a third wheel. "Uh, I'll just head to Stan's. You can manage the shopping with Hercules here," he says, surprising himself and smiling. Ben's cheeks go pink.

Beverley smiles back, a little too mischievously. "Ok, well, we'll see you there then. Play nice."

He's about to retort when he gets another series of texts.

that's the spaghetti man I remember

also yr coming to stan's now i don't make the rules

see you son

soon

He smiles despite himself. Idiot.

Richie stares at his phone blearily, grinning.

Even though he feels like the inside of his skull is hosting a tiny fire ant rave, and his skin feels overstretched and sensitive, and he fell asleep on this couch that he's hoping Mike has replaced since the last time – although that was definitely a different place, now he thinks about it - even though he feels like garbage, he's got the feeling that today's going to be an actual good one.

Which is rarely how he feels waking up like this back home. Which is often. But hey, small fucking miracles, huh?

"What are you grinning at?" Bill says grumpily, sitting slumped next to him on a stool at Mike's wooden kitchen counter. He watches the seltzer fizz in the glass in front of him with a dour expression.

"Just the fact that you got through that whole sentence without any trouble. I'm just so proud of my boy!" Richie says, and smirks, so Bill attempts to grab the phone off him, and they promptly engage in a tussle for it for the next minute.

"*Children*," Stan says long-sufferingly, turning away from the frying pan to give them the look Richie used to think of as the *Stan Special*, combining disappointment, irritation and an understanding of the very struggle it is to be friends with them sometimes. God if he hasn't missed its magnificence .

"I know this is hard, but could you maybe keep your hands to yourselves until I've finished this? You're not making anyone's headaches better," he says, and turns back to the stove.

"Richie –" Bill protests feebly.

Stan holds up a hand without saying anything. "If you end that sentence with *started it*, I swear to God," he says.

"Bill, you shouldn't antagonise Mother, you know how her nerves are, especially when she's had a glass of wine the night before," Richie says, putting on a voice like a character in a Tennessee Williams play. This gets Bill to laugh. Stan flips them off without turning back around, and Richie laughs with Bill.

"If I were you, I wouldn't laugh at the person who's crisping your bacon," Stan says, calmly.

Bill and Richie gasp. "You wouldn't, you monster!" Richie protests.

Stan turns around, steely eyed. "Watch me, Tozier."

"S-some people just want to watch the bacon burn," Bill adds suddenly, and they both look at him for a moment, disbelieving. Then Stan cracks and suddenly they're all laughing, and it's such a stupid joke but it's one of those things where in the moment it might be the funniest thing you've ever heard.

Richie shakes his head, taking his glasses off to wipe his eyes. "Jesus, is it that painful when I tell bad jokes?"

"Worse," Stan says, at the same time as Bill says, "M-much worse," and this sets them off again.

"Well, I hope you like crispy bacon, kids," Stan says, wiping his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

"You're making bacon without me? In my own kitchen?" Mike says, mock-indignantly, walking in from the hall carrying a quad of coffee cups in a holder. "And having jokes? After I have gone outside to bring you caffeine? So disrespectful."

"Actually, the bacon's just for them. They're hungover monsters and couldn't wait," Stan says, with a wry smile. "I was waiting till you got back to make yours and mine."

Mike grins at him. "Well, at least someone cares. *Unlike some people*," he says, turning around.

Mike puts on a show of being disappointed, glaring at them, but Richie can tell he's too pleased to really commit. "Well, what do you have to say for yourselves?"

"W-we are monsters, but also, w-we were dying," Bill admits. "I'm too old to be d-drinking this much."

“Dying!” Richie adds. “And we bullied our dear Stanley into it.”

“I’ll say,” Stan retorts, but he’s still grinning.

“Although, even though we look, and feel like stadium garbage on a hot day,” Richie begins and Bill pokes him, indignant. “*You* look simply radiant this morning, Michael,” he says, slipping into another character voice. He can’t help himself. He bats his eyelids a few times to sell it.

Mike works and fails to not laugh. He hands Richie his drink. “Ok, ok, you can stop now. I guess flattery will get you everywhere,” he says, shaking his head.

“In my town? Yep,” Richie says, taking a sip and smiling deeply. “In all seriousness, maybe it’s just the caffeine being absorbed into my system but there’s a sort of halo around you right now, makes it hard for me to look at you –“ he babbles until Mike chucks him on the shoulder as he goes to hand Bill his.

Bill takes a sip, and closes his eyes in bliss for a moment. “Thank you, and also I m-might love you?”

Mike shakes his head, but he laughs and then everyone does.

“Well, it’s very crispy, but that’s at least fifty percent your fault, so there you go,” Stan says, placing the plates in front of them.

“Obviously, we love you too, Staniel,” Richie says. “Goes without saying,”

Stan rolls his eyes, but Richie can tell he’s fighting a smile as he turns away.

“So where did that voice come from, Mikey?” he asks, intrigued.

Mike grins. “That’s my disappointed teacher voice. You couldn’t handle it at full power, though.”

“I shudder to think. The full Mike disappointment.” Richie does an exaggerated shiver and laughs, and takes a sip of his coffee.

Ben shouldn't be happy that Eddie had decided to go and see the others, but he is. And he was actually enjoying talking to Eddie, it was nice having him around again in all his slightly manic, neurotic glory. But because he apparently hasn't matured as much as he thought, the thought of getting to hang out with his high-school crush one-on-one is still exciting to him.

He's almost annoyed about it, this town making him feel like he's a kid again. It's a strange thing to remember again, how powerless it felt, how lonely it was to come here in the beginning.

Dad had said it wouldn't be forever, maybe two years, when he'd got that new job. Mom had said it was really good for them, it was going to mean that they would get to move into a bigger house, that he'd make friends. He didn't even really know at the time if he was going to miss Indiana – his hometown was only slightly bigger than Derry, and he'd barely had friends there anyway. But it was different when he moved. Suddenly he wasn't like any other kid, like he had been at home. He was strangely visible and invisible – not cool enough to be talked to, but uncool, unattractive enough to be like fresh chum in the water. He stuck out, no matter how much he wished he didn't.

He started spending a lot of time in the library – both because it was quiet and adults rarely bothered him, and the books were really interesting, and because it was the one place he was sure his tormentors would never set foot. But it was lonely, too. Seeing other kids – kids with grown-in friendships, the kind he'd barely had back in Indiana, and certainly not here – through the windows, playing together, laughing, pissing each other off; being in each other's lives; it was lonely.

The only time him sticking out ever worked, ever led to anything better was that weird, terrifying, mythical summer, when she'd noticed him. And then they'd noticed him. And then they'd all saved his life, and from then onwards he'd felt both completely blessed and totally screwed.

But he's not too annoyed to be back, he supposes, sneaking a look at her as she inspects some apples.

Bev hasn't gotten any less beautiful, even though that wasn't what made him so completely gone as a kid. Well, maybe the first few times they met, to be honest, it was hard not to be stunned everytime she smiled at him and her eyes lit up. But by the end of the summer, and everything that happened in it, it wasn't just a crush on a pretty girl. It was something that burned inside him, refusing to let go – not demanding to be seen, not demanding to be loved in return but set off by everything about her, her kindness, her bravery, her steeliness in the face of terror, her sometimes-dark sense of humour, even her bad moods.

"We should get some fruit, right?" Bev asks, and he almost misses it because he's too lost in his own thoughts. "I mean, I know I could use some fruit. And I think Eddie would object if we just bought trash, you know?"

Ben smiles. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea. From what I remember, at least, he was like the human personification of the term *an apple a day keeps the doctor away*."

Bev laughs, and it's so warm it fills him up. "I'm sure you eat a lot of fruit, too. Ok, I'm going to buy some apples. And oranges. Maybe I can make juice?"

He has to get a hold on this. He's not a teenager anymore, and there's a point where this probably just becomes creepy. It's not like he hasn't had real relationships in the last twenty years, it's not like he didn't try to move on. It's being back here that's bringing it all back.

They're walking around the shop together, her pointing out things to him and telling him to stop so she can throw things in their cart. He starts to wonder if this is what it would be like, Saturday morning grocery shopping, if they were married. He then remembers with an immediate cold stab of reality that she already is. To someone else.

She shakes her head, leaning in a little, conspiratorially. "This place has really gotten less crap since I worked here, huh?" she says darkly, but with a laugh in her tone.

He looks around. The supermarket is more modern now, it looks more in line with ones he sees in the city, but it's still pretty rural-

seeming. Not that he spends much time in supermarkets, when he can pay someone to do his grocery shopping for him, and on some occasions, cook the whole meal.

“Yeah, I think it’s currently experiencing the modern joys of the early-mid two-thousands,” Ben replies, and she laughs.

His heart is warmed again, and he reminds himself sternly, *married*. She’s *married*.

She looks at him funnily, smiling. “You know, I missed this. Us hanging out. Remember when you used to come by and say hi when I was working? God, it was sometimes the only good thing about my shift.”

Oh, back when I had an all-encompassing crush on you? Unlike now, twenty-two years later, when I’m totally fine, he doesn’t say. He can feel his cheeks reddening, which is almost worse. “Oh wow, I’d totally forgotten about that,” he lies, chuckling.

It’s totally fine to visit her on his way home from Spanish language club, Ben thinks. It’s not like it’s just Bill and him doing it. That might it make it weird, for him to do so. Mike comes to pick her up sometimes, or to bring her something she left at home. Stan passes through after piano lessons, he knows, and Eddie’s mother lets him do the shopping so she doesn’t have to leave the house, and he’s been with Richie when he’s come in solely to annoy Bev and make her laugh until her manager gives him the stink-eye and threatens him with a lifetime ban.

He walks in the front doors, having to wait for someone to walk in with because even the automatic doors don’t notice him, at least fifty percent of the time.

He sees her bagging groceries for a mom and her two kids, smiling and making polite conversation. The uniforms aren’t flattering to anyone, but she has a way of making anything look like it was made for her. Her bright hair’s grown out in the two years since she cut it off, it’s just above her shoulders now in a longish bob. He’s liked it at every length, though. He shouldn’t think so much about things like this, he reminds himself guiltily. It’s not friend-ish. He could try to lie to himself, but he knows he’s not exactly rhapsodising about Stan or Richie’s curls and remembering

every time they've had haircuts.

He walks forward with purpose. There was definitely something he needed here, definitely. Mom had totally said they'd needed more flour, right? Flour. Flour. Flour.

He scours the aisles for a packet of flour, finally finding it.

He walks back up to the front of the store, and waits in Bev's line. If he's going to be here, he may as well say hi to her. Any one of them would. It's like when he drops by the theatre, or the diner. It's the same as that.

Bev looks bored in between talking politely to customers, when she's just scanning through items and bagging them. So far, there's no one behind him. He kind of hopes it stays that way.

"Welcome to Shop-N-Save, how can I help you?" she says, in her customer-serving voice, and then she realises who she's talking to and her eyes light up. "Ben! Oh my god, it's so nice to see your face. I'm dying," she says, dramatically, though she's still beaming.

He can't help smiling too. "When do you finish work?"

She frowns. "Not for another hour. Take me with you?"

He chuckles. "What are you saving up for?" he reminds her.

She sighs. "A car." She frowns even more, and he does not have feelings about this. It's in no way cute. She gives him an accusatory glare. "Whose idea was that?"

"Yours!" he laughs, indignant except that he can't stop smiling.

"Oh, right. Like most of my bad ideas," she says, with a laugh. "So have you got something for me, or this just where the cool kids hang out now?"

He's momentarily confused, and then he remembers he's holding a bag of flour, which he brings up to the conveyor, feeling his cheeks going hot. Stupid traitorous pale skin. "For my mom," he says, gesturing to the flour. "And if it was where the cool kids hang out, I, uh don't think I'd be here," he adds, mainly to cover his embarrassment.

She laughs. "You've got a point. Or me, to be fair."

He grins, but secretly disagrees with her. He doesn't think there's a cooler girl in school. Maybe in the whole town. The tri-state area. Maybe in the whole state of Maine.

"I'll tell you what though, I don't miss those nineties server uniforms. They look nicer now. The fifteen-year-olds here don't know the agony of having to wear maroon-and-green with red hair," Bev says darkly.

"I don't know, I think you kind of pulled it off," Ben replies, with a smile.

She laughs, shaking her head. "You're making fun of me, Hanscom."

He laughs, in the same indignant-but-enjoying-it way. He puts a hand to his chest, fake-hurt. "When have I ever?"

She laughs. "I'm sure I can think of a few occasions!"

"Name one!"

"One? When I hadn't seen *Star Wars* and you guys lost your *damn minds!*" she says, laughing.

He gasps exaggeratedly. "Oh, we're going there? We referenced it *so much*, you didn't admit you hadn't actually seen it til junior year!"

She laughs, putting her hands up defensively. "I didn't mean to pretend I'd seen it, but then it went on so long I knew you guys would freak out, and then you'd make me watch it!"

"Did you end up liking it or did you end up talking about Han Solo for ages?" he retorts, grinning.

She laughs, indignant now. "See, there! Mocking!"

He can't help laughing too, even though she swats him lightly. He's suddenly very aware that her hand is on his arm, and she's probably left it there too long but he doesn't want her to take it away.

She looks at him, smiling openly and he can't look away, still smiling

himself. There's something in her eyes, though, even as she smiles at him now. Something familiar, but older maybe. Something that has to do with how her arms have been covered since he saw her last night. It's warm today, not so much that it would be crazy to be wearing a cardigan but strange. The way she keeps playing with the sleeves, unwittingly, pulling them down.

"That can't be Beverley Marsh, can it?" an oddly-familiar, sickeningly sweet voice says. It's not nice, though, it's sweetness poured over barbed wire, barely veiled maliciousness. That can only be one of a few people, and he's pretty sure he can guess without having to look.

Bev removes her hand gracefully, and turns to smile politely at the interloper. "Well, wouldn't you know it, it can and is. It's been too long, Gretta," Bev says civilly, not giving ground.

The years have not been kind to Gretta Keene, in Ben's opinion. She looks strangely the same, but faded. Her familiar sour, resentful expression is still there, but it's hardened and cracked into something deeply bitter, broken by over twenty years of life's disappointments. And unlike she always seemed to think she deserved, judging by her clothes she hasn't married nearly as well as she wanted to.

Gretta smiles falsely at her. "Of course, I'd know you anywhere with that hair. So...vibrant," she says in a voice dripping with the nicest vitriol, letting the pause hang *just* long enough.

Bev doesn't rise to it. As Ben knows, she's been through far worse than some mean girl sniping. "Thanks, Gretta," she says, with amiable boredom. "It's been so great to catch up, but we're –"

Gretta holds up a colourfully-taloned hand, smirking and her eyes go to him again, looking him up and down. He supposes he's used to people doing it, now, but it's still weird. Especially when it's one of your high-school bullies, looking at you like you're a cut of prime rib.

"Oh no, but you can't leave without introducing me to your man!" she says, over-friendly, like they're best friends catching up over cosmos. She looks back at Bev. "You've really done well for yourself. Then again, you always did."

He's proud of Bev for keeping it together like an adult woman and not smacking her full in the face. She had once, when they were seventeen, and even though generally Ben didn't like violence as an answer to a problem, he had to admit that Gretta hadn't tried it for a while after that.

"This isn't my husband, but I'm not surprised you don't remember him," Bev says, with cold humour. She smirks enigmatically, and Ben is surprised to see this ruffles Gretta, whose fake smile slips as she looks at him.

He smiles at her, all politeness. "And here I thought you said I'd die a fat virgin. It is truly *great* to see you, Gretta."

The look of realisation is almost worth every bit of painful exercise and denied food from the last fifteen years. Her smile completely slips and she can't seem to help but look stunned.

"Hanscom?" she says, faintly.

He raises his eyebrows at her.

She attempts to regain her composure, looking him up and down again. "Well, you certainly pulled it together," she says, and he doesn't like her tone. Too hungry, too bitter, a warning.

"Anyway, like Bev said, we've got to be going," he says.

She keeps looking at them, with that narrow-eyed look she used to get. It never meant anything good. She smiles like a snake, watching them curiously. "I doubt it's a coincidence, you both being back here, at the same time. The rest of your little...Loser club friends here too?"

She takes their momentary hesitation to answer as an affirmation. "Right, I thought I heard something about that. Of course, Mike's always been here. Poor, lonely Mike. No family here anymore," she says, pouting. Ben sees Bev tense up. "Did he call you back? Why now, after all this time? I don't think I've seen you all here at the same time since graduation." Gretta's eyes narrow more and her smirk widens, becoming sharper, all the better for hitting her target.

“Actually, I did hear from some people that Stan Uris, of all people, moved back to his parents’ old house. And here I heard he was very happy in Georgia, right? So sad, what happened to his parents. I’d say at least they’re in a better place but I’m not sure Jews even do that, right? But why would you all come back for that? The funeral already happened. What could it be that would be so *important* ?” she says mockingly, drenching the last word in malice, eyes sparkling.

Ben can almost feel Bev’s barely contained anger coming off her. Gretta might have been out of practice not seeing them for twenty years, but she’d remembered exactly how to press Bev’s buttons. It was never about insulting her. That she could handle easy. It was going after them that used to anger her.

Ben finds her hand automatically, and Bev holds it. He squeezes it, just lightly, and doesn’t break eye contact with Gretta. “Not that we owe you an explanation, but we try to catch up every few years. It’s hard as adults, when we’re all over the country, so we don’t usually come back to Derry because it’s too far. I mean, that’s just what you do when you have a group of friends that want to see each other. Because we actually like each other. I’m sure you’ve got friends like that, right, Gretta?” he says calmly, without faltering once. Nearly two decades in business has given him an edge with her he didn’t used to have – he knows how to present a cool front to the enemy.

Her smirk drops off.

Bev runs with the lie, without so much as looking at him. “Also, we just don’t like coming back to this shithole. I’ve been back two days, and *already*, I can’t stand the idea of being stuck here. What a sad, bitter life that would be,” she says with casual coldness.

Gretta glares at her, all pretence of social niceties dropped. But before she can get another jab in, Bev turns the trolley around and they walk off in the other direction.

Bev doesn’t say much more til they’re out of the store and safely in the car.

She sighs. “Fuck, it’s like stepping into a time machine,”

He snorts. “You’re telling me. Are you ok?” he asks, looking at her before he starts the car.

She nods. “I’ve never given a shit about what Gretta Keene says,” she says, with a rueful smile. She looks at him, smile fading. “But all of it. The whole place. I meant what I said to her. That’s why I had to – get out, you know?” she says, almost like she wants absolution. Like she did him any wrong by leaving.

He stares at her, and it’s ridiculous how much affection he still feels for her. Can’t help it. Not when she looks at him, not like this. “Of course,” he says softly. “I get it. I did the same thing. I had to. We all had to .”

She looks sadder, and he wishes he knew what to say. “Not everyone did though. And your parents moved away when you were in college. You left less here,” she says, miserably.

He contemplates putting his hand on hers – which is resting on the middle of the front seats glove-compartment – but can’t quite work up the courage, so he finds himself just touching her fingertips with his. She doesn’t pull away. “Bev, if this is about Mike...he was just happy to see you again, you know? I don’t think he’s holding anything against you for leaving.”

She smiles at him, still sad but slightly happier. She interlaces her fingers a little with his, and his heart does a dumb little flip. “Thanks, Ben. I just cut so many – “ she makes like she wants to say something and then cuts herself off, looking frustrated and a little guilty. “I’ll – I’ll explain later. But thanks. You saved me back there, as usual.”

He smiles at her. “Well, I usually had help.”

She smiles more, and pulls her hand back so he can drive them out of the carpark, finally. Ben thinks that he would probably drive one handed if he had to. Not that he’d tell Eddie that. He’d have a heart attack.

Eddie gets out of his own car at Stan’s house. The coffee is making

him feel better, but it's also making him more amped. Myra doesn't like him to drink too much coffee, she says it makes him too excitable. But, he reminds himself frustratedly, he doesn't need to listen to her. Not when she's not here.

It's weird being back at Stan's place. The last time he was here had to be senior year, maybe. He always liked it – Stan's parents weren't exactly rich, but they had a much nicer house than Eddie's. He liked being there more than his own house, anyway. But he felt that way about a lot of friends' houses.

Stan's parents were strict, too, but they had always been nice to him. He got the feeling they saw him as the least corrupting influence on their son, which was true, although they might have felt differently if they'd known the swear words Stan had picked up directly from him (he'd picked them up from Richie, but still). His mom was normal, cared about him a lot but not to the point of anxiety, the way a mom should. Eddie thought it was unfair that she had died so suddenly. He wanted to tell Stan this, how sorry he was about it, but every time he tried to last night the words got swallowed up and lost with everything else he was sorry for Stan about and he couldn't even pull any of it out.

He knocks on the front door, trying not to think about that. Unexpectedly, Richie opens the door.

"Oof, you look how I feel right now," Richie says, biting into a half-eaten apple smugly.

Eddie resists the urge to smack it out of his mouth, but it's hard. "And you don't fucking look like a million bucks either," he says, and Richie smirks wider, chewing and swallowing slowly. He watches the movement of Richie's Adam's apple, and briefly wishes Richie would get half-masticated apple caught in his windpipe, the smug fuck. How can one person make a relatively benign activity so annoying? Richie used to make an art form out of it, and clearly he's only gotten better – worse? – at it.

"Well that's kind of my brand, so," Richie replies, still grinning. "Care to come in, Eds?" he adds, motioning to around him.

Eddie sighs, following him in. "Don't call me that." He thinks about it. "I don't remember the last time I saw you eat any fruit, actually. I seem to remember you declared it your mortal enemy?"

Richie grins wider. "Well, sure, but apparently that's a worse idea when you're a forty-year-old man than when you're fifteen. Also all three of them back here suggested it might get rid of the remains of my hangover. Honestly, between the four of you it's like it's like you're surprised I've lived this long on my own." He's putting on an exaggerated voice, like the one he uses for stand-up.

"I'm sure we're all a little shocked," Eddie replies. "What's your place like, just takeout containers and empty beer bottles everywhere?"

Richie chuckles. "I'm sure you'd have a panic attack just looking at it," he says, and looks at Eddie. "I mean, I have a cleaning lady. Well, a woman who cleans. Used to, anyway."

Eddie's surprised by this. "Really?"

Richie smirks, and Eddie realises too late he's in the trap. "Yeah, your mom used to clean up after we –"

Eddie groans. "Fuck you, man. She's dead, you know?"

Richie is undeterred. "Rest her soul. Gotta keep the memory alive. The sweet, sweet memory."

"Fuck off, Richie," he answers, but he has to look away because he finds himself smiling despite the frustration. Which is nuts,

Eddie can't explain why Richie's allowed to say this kind of shit, and not get punched. The rest of them would hardly be so crass as to make sex jokes about someone's dead mother. He'd consider punching anyone else in town who did it, those old jocks who now either own car dealerships or work at the gas station, but for some reason Richie gets away with it. Maybe because as much as he hates it every time, he knows Richie's being an asshole but he's not trying to be cruel.

Stan, Mike and Bill are in the living room. Bill and Mike seem to be locked in an intense game of chess.

Stan's sitting in a seat watching them, but he gets up when he sees Eddie. "Thank God! It's just been me and Richie since we found this chess set in a box and they got into a death match."

"Hey!" Richie replies, mock-outraged. "Here I thought I was entertaining you with my professional wit and fun personality. It's always the last people you'd expect."

"You really have forgotten me if I'm the last person you'd expect to get annoyed with you, Rich," Stan replies drily.

Richie flips him off, grinning and goes to annoy Bill and Mike.

"How are you doing?" Eddie ends up saying, then fearing this sounds too unintentionally clumsy, he adds, "With last night, I mean. I definitely drank too much which is weird because I really never drink that much anymore, because I'm getting way past being able to do hangovers and uh, insurance people aren't exactly big partiers, and Myra says I get too boisterous when I drink, so..." He trails off, trying to stem the flow of babble.

Stan grins, looking amused, but it's not smug like Richie's. It's just friendly, like he's remembering an old joke, a good time they had.

"Yeah, I'm not doing too bad. Mike looked out for me, so I have no hangover. Anymore," he says, intentionally getting louder at the end of the sentence. "No thanks to *some* people here."

Eddie sees Bill and Richie share a look, sniggering .

"You want a coffee or something? I've left a lot of the kitchen stuff out, so it's no trouble," Stan asks.

"I just had one, so I probably shouldn't have another one because it makes me a bit, y'know, antsy," Eddie replies, quickly. "Do you have any herbal tea?"

Stan gives him a wry smile. "Yeah I think I can manage that. Come on."

Eddie follows him out of the living room and towards the kitchen. It's

still weird how familiar and unfamiliar it feels. It must be even weirder to have to live here. He looks around and sees a lot of opened and unopened boxes. The living room is emptier of furniture than he remembers, less fussily decorated but less warm too. There must be a fair bit of stuff in storage already.

“So, you’re sorting through your parents’ stuff?” Eddie asks, looking around.

Stan’s shoulders stiffen slightly. “Yeah, kind of another reason I came back.” Neither of them mention the other reason but it hangs heavy in the air for a moment. Stan’s changed out of the shirt he was wearing last night, and this one has long sleeves as well. *Is that why?* Eddie thinks. He hadn’t wanted to do that when his mother died. He can’t tell whether that just makes him a bad son.

Stan looks through the cupboards and finds a box of chamomile tea. “This alright?” he asks, and Eddie nods. Stan busies himself with making the tea.

“Were any of your extended family in their will?” Eddie asks, and maybe he shouldn’t, but he’s curious.

Stan shakes his head, brows contracting. There’s a story there. “Not in an important way.”

“He didn’t leave anything to the Washington Urises?” Eddie says, remembering Stan complaining every time his cousins came to visit, or more often, when they had to go interstate to see them.

Stan chuckles, a shade too bitterly. “My dad wouldn’t have wanted to add any more to my Uncle Malachi’s pile, he was always bitching about how much more they had than us, and how little work he did, and how ungodly he was.” He shakes his head. “No, so I pretty much inherited it all, and I have to figure out what to do with all –“ he falters, splashing hot water out of the cup he’s pouring. “With, uhm, all of this stuff,” he finishes quietly, looking down as he pushes Eddie’s cup over to him.

“Thanks,” Eddie says.

Stan's blinking down at his own drink, and he smiles self-consciously. When he looks up his eyes are reddish and watery. "I'm sorry, this is...apparently something I do now, without warning," he says, attempting a jokey tone, but looking uncomfortable.

Eddie's never been one for speeches like Bill. He's never been good at being comforting like most of the others, but that's never stopped him from trying to anyway.

"When my mom died, I was, uh, in this meeting at work," he starts, steadily. "Well that's what I pieced together later. I was twenty-nine, I think? Still a junior analyst. Working a lot, not a lot of time, made me antsy. I got this – call, from a doctor, asking me if I was living near where this hospital was, in upstate New York, Ithaca, you know, and would it be possible for me to come? And I said, no, I'm in the city, and they asked me if I was Sonia Kaspbrak's next of kin, as they had been told, and I said yes, and they told me what had happened. Heart attack. In the grocery store, of all fucking places. She just dropped, apparently. Some random woman shopping next to her called an ambulance for her."

Stan is listening intently, something painful and understanding in his expression. "Jesus," he says quietly.

"Yeah," Eddie says, almost feeling like he wants to laugh, even though it's one of his worst memories. And he's got a lot to choose from. He looks down at his tea, and half-laughs, awkwardly.

"It was just like – it took me by surprise, because I'd only got her set up in Ithaca like three years earlier, so she could be closer to me, you know? I had to pay some people to get her moved because it's not like I had any time to come back here and do it myself. And she didn't really have anyone here, but it was *so hard* to convince her to leave, she kept talking about how moving is the number two highest stressor, and her nerves couldn't handle it. Like, she would have *hated* living in the city, but I thought she'd enjoy living somewhere pretty like Ithaca, and she wasn't that far from me. Well nearer than here, anyway," he says, and he has to take a breath. He never really talks about it, he's realising. Certainly not with Myra.

He takes a sip of his tea. It's supposed to be calming. "She was

supposed to be there for a lot longer, you know? And I – I drove up to Ithaca by myself, and I tried to sort through it, but she was *such a goddamn hoarder*, and I just *couldn't* –“ he breaks off, finding his eyes getting hot and his vision blurring as he looks at his tea.

He looks at Stan, who nods understandingly, red-eyed. “You shouldn’t have had to do that by yourself, Ed. I’m sorry.”

Eddie shakes his head. “Don’t be – I saved a few things, and I paid some guys to take the rest of it away.” He looks back at Stan. “It really fucking sucks doing it by yourself though. That’s why we’re here though, you know. To help out.”

Stan gulps, or maybe it’s a half-swallowed sob. “I’m so, so glad you are,” he says hoarsely. “Sorry, crying again.”

Eddie smiles a bit at this. “I mean, we both are now. So.”

Stan laughs, a half-startled laugh. “True.”

Eddie chuckles. “Better stop before Richie comes to annoy us. He’d be insufferable.”

Stan laughs again. “Honestly, I’m surprised he hasn’t yet. You know what Mike and Bill are like when they play chess. Full concentration, no distractions.”

Eddie laughs. “That’s true. If he asks, we’re talking about boring work stuff.”

Stan nods, grinning, and takes a sip of his drink.

Eddie looks around the kitchen counter. There are some old books down the end, including a familiar one with pictures of birds on it.

He looks back at Stan. “Do you still birdwatch?”

Stan looks surprised. “When I can. Not as much, now, but yeah, it’s still a hobby I guess.”

Eddie nods. “That’s nice to hear. I liked going with you, when I did. It was kind of...calmer.”

Stan grins. "True. I was surprised you could stop talking during it."

Eddie gasps, exaggeratedly. "You *loved* having me there, don't lie," he says, shaking his head indignantly.

Stan laughs. "I did."

Eddie looks back at Stan. "You want to go sometime? I get up early usually, anyway."

Stan looks gratified, and still a little misty-eyed. "Yeah I'd, uhm, really like that."

He's seven and they've just moved to town, and Dad's been gone for a while. Long enough that he's starting to forget there was a time when he wasn't, but short enough that Eddie can still remember he had one, and he used to sing lullabies. And that he was shorter and smaller than Mom, and that he used to let Eddie curl up in his lap in his old recliner, when he fell asleep in front of the TV, and he never got mad about it, just carried him off to bed. Eddie sometimes pretends he's moved to the moon, because Mom won't say what happened, just that he stopped living one day when Eddie was in daycare, and asking about it makes her mad, so he doesn't. He doesn't tell her about the moon, either.

Mom is anxious about sending him off to school, even though he was in school last year too. She was anxious about it then too. "You need a good education though. Information, Eddie-bear, is your only weapon," she used to say, and he didn't know what that meant, but it sounded terrifying.

He's small and shy and starting at this new school in January, now, which is weird because it's halfway through second grade, and everything will be different here. He comes to school with a backpack full of medicines for all of his allergies, the ones Mom worries about so much, and his inhaler, because without it Mom says he could have an asthma attack and die, and he doesn't want to just stop living like Dad so he keeps it near him at all times, which is handy because the thought kind of makes his throat close up.

He doesn't have any friends, and he doesn't want to leave Mom when she drops him off in the morning. He doesn't like this school, but he didn't

really like the other one before. He had one friend there though, Alvin, who wore glasses and shared crayons with him, but they didn't see each other outside of school. Still, that's one up on here.

He's eating in this spot he's found that's away from the other kids, and out of the way of the meaner older kids who'll push you into a locker for nothing, just in passing. He doesn't really like the crush of kids sitting together, coughing and sharing food and germs. Mom is always going on about being very careful around the other kids, because they could make him sick. Sicker. He wonders if Dad was sick too. He can't remember if he was.

He's just about to sit down when he notices this boy sitting there, very still, looking at the trees and writing something down in a little book. He looks very absorbed in the task.

Eddie feels strangely annoyed by this. He doesn't have much to look forward to in school, but this is his lunch time spot, and it's usually empty. Who does this kid think he is?

"Hey," he says, surprising himself. "You're in my spot!"

The kid looks at him, tilting his head in a curious, oddly birdlike manner.

Eddie wonders if this is going to turn into a fight, because he's not prepared to do that, and then promptly decides he doesn't need to worry.

"Sorry. I just had to record this ruby-throated hummingbird, I've never seen it here before," the boy says, big words in a reedy, small voice.

Eddie is confused then, and forgets his anger. "What are you doing?" he asks, curious, sitting down next to him.

The boy points in front of them. "Can you see it, on the roots of the tree there?" he says, in a voice just above a whisper.

There is a tiny bird, black-headed with a flash of red at its throat, so bright that for an awful second Eddie thinks it's injured. "What's it called again?" he asks, quietly.

The boy points at his book. In his book, he's neatly printed: "Ruby Throated Hummingbird" and the date and place next to it. He has neater

writing than any kids' Eddie has seen. Certainly for a boy.

"Why are you writing down birds?" Eddie asks, looking at the list of others he's seen. "My mom hates birds. She says that they carry disease, and that I shouldn't go near them."

The boy gives him a look like he's just said something crazy. "Some birds, maybe. Pigeons. Not all. It's a hobby – that's what my dad calls it. My grandpa taught me to do it, he's got hundreds of birds in his book," he says, eyes lighting up in his last sentence.

Eddie doesn't know why anyone would do that, but he doesn't know why people do a lot of things. Why his Mom is constantly cleaning. What will set her off. So he doesn't question it.

He notices again that the boy is wearing a strange kind of round hat. Not even a hat, because it doesn't cover his head at all. "Why's your hat so small?" he finds himself asking.

The boy gives him another look, but like this is obvious. "It's a yarmulke. I have to wear it, I'm Jewish."

Eddie nods like he understands what any of that means. He recognises the last word, or part of it, he thinks. Maybe he's heard it from Mom, when she goes off in rants about people, but he doesn't really know.

"That's a religion," the boy says hesitantly, looking defensive. Maybe he gets pushed into lockers too, just for wearing that tiny-whatever-it's-called.

"Cool," he says, honestly. He doesn't know much about religion except he hates having to wear hot, fancier clothes on Sundays. The boy's expression warms, and he smiles for the first time.

"You're new, right?" he asks, and Eddie nods solemnly. "I'm Stan. I'm going to find my friends now, if you want to come."

Eddie finds himself feeling excited – cautiously – for the first time since he moved here. "Yeah, I would," he says. "I'm Eddie."

Bev knocks on the door.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to carry one of the bags?” she asks Ben, and he shakes his head.

He’s carrying their groceries, but it doesn’t even seem like a strain. “I’m fine, I lift weights heavier than this,” he says, with a self-deprecating grin.

She grins back. “Alright, alright, Superman. They’re home, right?”

Ben nods, and then the front door is opened, somewhat surprisingly by Richie.

“Richie! Great to see you, but since when are you the person that volunteers to get the door?” she says, with a laugh, giving him a hug.

He rolls his eyes dramatically. “Since apparently I’m the fucking doorman now, on account of the fact that Stan and Eddie are having some kind of powwow in the kitchen, and Mike and Bill are *still* locked into their fucking chess match.”

“Richie! Who gave them a board? Remember the Winter deadlock of 1992 ?” Bev exclaims.

Ben grins, shaking his head. “Rookie error letting them have a chessboard, Rich. Have they passed hour three yet?”

Richie pales. “Don’t say that, they’ve just got started an hour ago.”

Ben laughs, and he shares a look with her. “Rookie error,” they say at almost the same time.

Walking past them in the living room as they head to the kitchen, they call out hi. Mike and Bill are staring intently at the board, and don’t seem to register for a few seconds. Then they call out a half-hearted reply, not looking up. It’s such a familiar sight, the number of times she’d seen them do that at the farmhouse where she and Mike lived, it throws her for a minute.

“Well,” Bev says to Richie. “You haven’t lost them completely yet. They’re still at ‘hearing outside sounds’, we may still be able to save them.”

Richie grins. "I mean, Mike's playing chess in a cardigan, and Bill keeps muttering to himself, I don't think there's any saving them."

She swats at him, but laughs.

Getting into the kitchen, Eddie and Stan are indeed talking, holding mostly-empty-looking tea cups.

"And as you can see, it's a riot in here as well," Richie says, deadpan. "What thrilling responsible adult conversations are you having?"

"Work stuff, mostly," Stan says drily. "About our *responsible adult* jobs."

"Can't relate to that, Stan my man," Richie says, with exaggerated boredom. He eyes a box of teabags on the counter. "And you're drinking *herbal tea*? Eds, I sense your sinister hand in this. "

Eddie makes a face at him. "Again, fuck you, and it's calming. Which clearly, I fucking need. You could stand to try it."

Richie makes a face. "If you tell me you're into kombucha too, we may have to end this friendship."

Eddie opens his mouth to retort, and as they bicker Stan comes over to her and Ben.

"You didn't have to get all this food, guys!" he says sounding surprised but grateful, motioning Ben to put the bags on the counter.

"Don't worry about it," Ben says lightly. "We're seven adults having lunch, we'll go through a lot probably."

"Still, that's very generous," Stan replies, appreciatively, giving him a hug hello now that he's put the bags down.

"Well you're one of the only people I'd do it for," Bev says, also giving him a hug hello.

Up close, she can see his eyes are a little red, and she wouldn't put it

down to simple tiredness. Whatever they were talking about maybe wasn't as easy as work stuff, but she doesn't ask. He does seem happier than when she first saw him last night.

"You slept alright?" she asks, trying not to sound too worried.

He nods. "Yeah, I did," he says, smiling. There's something he won't talk about there, but she doesn't pry.

"Good," she just says. "I didn't expect this place to feel so familiar, you know? I don't remember coming over here as much as you came to the farmhouse."

He looks around the kitchen momentarily and nods. "Yeah, actually. A handful of birthdays and studying sessions, I think?"

"Yeah, I remember," she says, nodding. Ben nods in agreement.

For a moment they seem to get caught up remembering those times, studying for Chem while the family tabby curled up on their notes and Stan had to physically pick her up off them, standing next to him and cheering while he blew out the candles on his cake, dancing stupid dances to anything straight-edge enough not to shock his parents. His parents didn't like her either, and they seemed to tar Mike with the same brush, so she'd never really liked them, but still. It didn't mean she wanted them to die prematurely.

"So, are we making lunch now? Happy to do it, but someone needs to help because I'm not being the Snow White to you guys' Six Dwarfs," Bev says with a wry smile, mostly joking but also not.

"Don't say that about Eddie, Bev, you'll hurt his feelings. He's a very normal height, ok?" Richie says, smirking, as he and Eddie come up to them. Eddie glares at him. "Fuck you, I *am* average height, which makes me normal," he says. "If anything, you're freakishly tall."

"Well as long as I can always look down on you, I'm happy," Richie replies, grinning beatifically.

"I'm happy to help," Stan says, giving them his patented long-suffering look.

“No, no, you’re having us here, I’ll help, otherwise I might end up strangling Richie, and that would maybe ruin the mood,” Eddie says darkly.

“Maybe?” Richie echoes, indignantly.

Bev sighs. “So it’s sorted, then.”

“I believe that’s a checkmate, my friend,” Mike says, victoriously, smiling widely.

Bill studies the board, and lets out a held-in breath that contains several swearwords. He groans defeatedly, but accepts it by putting his hand out to shake. Some weird holdover from their childhood games, because Bill had said that’s how his dad had taught him, to shake at the end like good sports. Mike supposes he must have been that kind of Dad to Bill, once, the kind that taught him things like chess and catch. The kind that laughed and spun him around and let him sit on his shoulders, maybe. But by the time Mike knew him, until the day he and Mrs. Denbrough moved to Arizona – no, Florida, he thinks, in maybe his and Bill’s junior or senior year of college – for a new start in a place that didn’t constantly remind them of their dead child; for that whole time he was mostly busy and standoffish, and seemed to not want to have anything to do with his living one.

They shake hands. “Good game,” they say, overlapping each other, same as before.

Mike blinks and looks around. “How long have we been here? Didn’t people come in before?” he asks Bill.

Bill shrugs. “I vaguely remember it? Where the hell is everyone now?”

As if on cue, Stan and Richie come out of the kitchen door and make a beeline for them.

“Game over?” Stan asks, with a small smile.

Mike grins. “Yes.”

Richie groans. “Fucking *finally*. Gonna have to hide that board from you chess nerds from now on, I forgot how weird you get about it.”

Bill frowns. “No, I’m gonna need it. There *will* be a rematch, Hanlon.”

Mike chuckles. “How many times do you need to lose till you learn, Denbrough? I’m a teacher, I’m pretty good at schooling people!” he says, cocky from the win, and Richie says, “OHHHH” in exactly the same way he used to when they were fourteen and someone had just got in a *sick burn*, and it’s so familiar it makes everyone crack up for a moment.

“Guess I don’t need to ask who won then,” Stan says, smirking and Bill shakes his head, but he’s grinning too. Mike puts his hand up for a high five and Stan catches it, almost without looking.

Bill makes an indignant noise of protest, half-hearted because he’s still grinning too much for it to land. “Hey!”

Stan shrugs. “Hey yourself, you knew the risks. You come at the king –” he starts.

“ – you best not miss!” Mike finishes, triumphantly, sharing a smirk with Stan.

Bill laughs. “And you’re Omar then? Truce?”

“A Stringer truce?” Mike asks, raising an eyebrow suspiciously.

“Yeah, yeah, we’ve all seen *The Wire*,” Richie cuts in, in a defensive way that makes Mike certain he hasn’t but is familiar enough with it to recognise the reference. “But maybe more relevant than a show that’s probably older than some of Mike’s students, I’ve been given orders by the wildly efficient and honestly fucking *terrifying* duo of Eddie and Bev that you assholes can’t get out of helping with lunch. They need you to set the table.”

Mike and Bill make similar indignant noises, and Richie turns to Stan with a grin. “Obviously, you’re not one of the assholes, Stan, that’s just the chess nerds. We would never call you that. They said you didn’t have to help, either,” Richie says, laying it on deliberately thick.

Stan rolls his eyes. “I can think of several occasions where you personally called me that, but I appreciate the sentiment,” he says, dryly, but softens a little. “I’m happy to help set up though, I probably know where everything is better than any of you.”

“And that’s why we value you as a friend,” Richie says, mock-seriously. “Your encyclopaedic knowledge of and talent for finding hidden plates and cutlery.”

“Shut up and help me find a tablecloth,” Stan says attempting a frown, its edges already being pulled up into a grin.

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Mike had actually forgotten what a well-oiled and terrifyingly efficient (or maybe just terrifying) machine Bev and Eddie were when they decided to do something together. Group projects quivered before them. Board games and two-person trivia teams were hard fought away from them.

Lunch is really good, and surprisingly very healthy. He wonders whose influence that was. Eddie’s, maybe because of all his food-health related hangups, or the kind of thing Bev would make at home, or maybe even Ben, who had seemingly been helping in the kitchen too (albeit in a more sous-chef role, most likely). He definitely looks like the kind of person that knows the benefits of kale and açai berries and can give you healthy recipes for salads and vegetarian pastas.

It’s just – nice, being around everyone again. He’d thought he was certainly busy enough with lesson plans and marking and teaching, and whatever things he could fit around that. Driving out to Portland when he had time and having the sort of experiences you can’t really have in a small town like Derry. He wouldn’t have said he was particularly unhappy with it, a little stressed sometimes. But this – everyone chatting, laughing, teasing each other as if no time had passed – he’s beginning to realise how much he’s missed it, and just how big the hole is in his life without them all. He doesn’t want to dwell on that, though, so he’s trying to just enjoy it for as long as everyone can stay.

Being back in this house is weirder, and altogether less enjoyable than that though. He can't escape the spectral memories of the people who used to live here. Sometimes, it's like he can almost feel their disapproval, on the back of his neck.

He waits on the doorstep, having knocked politely. He's picking Stan up, in his secondhand sturdy old pickup, so he can teach him how to drive stick.

"You have to help me, please, I'm desperate. I don't want to have to ask my dad, and Mr Aitchinson is so weird to learn from," Stan had begged, over lunch. "I can maybe just barely pay you, maybe, or I can find something else to give you –"

"Steady on there," Richie had cut in, in his loopy British general voice. "You don't need to give up your precious virtue for driving lessons, Stangela. There must be another way!"

Stan had looked unimpressed. "Fuck off, Richie," he had said automatically, flipping him the bird without stopping to look.

Mike had laughed, but in a light-hearted way. "Hey, hey, we're friends, you don't need to pay me. How about Saturday morning?"

Stan had frowned. "Shabbat, unfortunately. My dad thinks we're not doing enough to respect it, so he's really cracking down on what I'm doing," he had said with a grimace. "So I'll be in temple most of the morning, at least. Maybe afternoon?" he had said uncertainly.

"Sorry, no, I should know by now," Mike had said, a bit sheepish. He'd known Stan for about three years now, and it's not like he didn't listen when he talked about his religion. He actually found it very interesting, especially when Stan's eyes lit up talking about the things he liked about it. What must it feel like to have that kind of passion for something like that? He might have known, if things had gone differently in his life. He thinks about it a lot. "What about Sunday morning? Does that work?" Mike had asked, smiling apologetically.

Stan had looked deeply relieved, and nodded. "Ten a.m. ok?"

Waiting on the Uris's porch is always a weird experience. He's been to

Stan's house for birthday parties and the like, but he almost never comes here alone. In fact, he's struggling to remember if he ever has. He doesn't get the feeling that Stan's parents like him. Or maybe it's not even whether they like him or not, because they're not exactly huggy-and-overly-warm with any of the others, either. It's just a – feeling of uncomfortableness, distance – one he's not exactly a stranger to in this town.

Their front door finally opens, and Rabbi Uris stands in the doorway in sensible slacks and a long-sleeve button up, looking confused as he looks Mike up and down.

"Michael." He says, clipped, like he's expecting Mike to start trying to sell him an encyclopedia set. "What are you doing here?"

Mike tries not to resent the tone in his voice, already suspicious. He smiles, but not too widely in case it skews a bit too Richie and makes Rabbi Uris think they're Up To Something. "Just picking Stan up, Rabbi Uris. We're just going to hang out with the others," he says, and technically it's not a lie because they're going to do that after driving. But Stan asked him not to say anything about it.

Rabbi Uris looks suspicious. "Right, the rest of your friends," he says, after a moment. "Bill Denbrough will be there too?"

Mike can't see why this changes anything. If anything, Bill's the one that leads them into trouble most often. Certainly he's the reason they all ended up in the underbelly of a sewer, in mortal danger, that first summer together three years ago. "He will, sir," he says politely, anyway.

Rabbi Uris seems to consider this. "He's a smart kid. Good," he says, definitively. Mike thinks privately that being smart doesn't mean Bill has ever had good sense, not the kind that the Rabbi is clearly hoping he'll exercise and influence the rest of them with. Not that they care, because they love following him into whatever adventure he's got in mind. Mostly.

They stand in awkward silence for a moment. Just as Mike's about to ask if Stan's going to come out soon, or whether he can tell him he's here, Rabbi Uris speaks again, suddenly.

"You live out on Sackett Farm, correct?" he says, seriously.

"Yes, sir," Mike answers, surprised enough that he almost doesn't add the 'sir'. Rabbi Uris is one of those parents who seems to expect this from children. Not all his friends' parents do – Richie's dad is always telling them to call him Went, and joking around with them, but they're definitely on the more laid-back end of the parenting scale. Too laid-back, maybe, according to Richie when he's had a joint or a few beers.

He considers Mike. "Do you have any plans for higher education?"

Mike can hear the implicit insult without him saying it, but he keeps his back straight, and his expression polite and calm. "I do a lot on the farm, for Ernie, and when I'm not doing that I do shifts at the diner. I'm still figuring out whether Ernie needs me, and if I could get financial assistance to somewhere like Maine U."

Rabbi Uris purses his lips. "I see. When you're not finding time to drive your friends around, I guess?" he says, and there's something antagonistic about his tone. Mike tries not to take the bait. Things like this are not new to him, the implication that he doesn't belong, that he's not good enough. They pretend it's about other things but he knows what it's about. Kind of a hard thing to forget.

"Well, I think it's important to have good friendships, and keep them," he says, steadily. "I'd be pretty isolated without them."

Rabbi Uris just nods, looking like he'd rather Mike was anywhere else in the world than taking up space on his front porch. There's another awkward silence.

"Could you tell Stan I'm – " Mike starts and Rabbi Uris cuts him off.

He frowns. "You know, young man, I don't say this to be cruel. I understand you kids went through a terrible ordeal together, and that can make you feel –" he starts, and his expression is strange and angry and somehow – scared. He takes a breath and starts again, and Mike listens with increasingly horrified fascination.

"I appreciate that you've been a – a good friend to Stan, since what happened," he says stiffly, and Mike seriously doubts he does. "I don't have to tell you that he seemed to come away worst injured, and he was already fragile –" his expression is definitely upset now, as upset as he'll

let himself get in front of someone like Mike. He obviously loves Stan, the memory is obviously just as painful – or even more – as it is for Mike, thinking about the cuts and purplish bruises around his face back then. But Mike wants to tell him, suddenly, that he's wrong – that he might look it, with his skinny limbs and his delicate way of looking at things, but Stan is not fragile, that he's the bravest of them actually, because he was the most afraid and he came with them anyway – but he doesn't. Rabbi Uris looks at him, some kind of big emotion that could be either positive or negative knocking up against the bounds of his respectability, standoffishness and general uncomfortableness with Mike.

“But at a certain point, you'll have to stop relying on that – safety-blanket feeling that maybe you give each other. It's not healthy.” Rabbi Uris says, sternly, in what is probably his sermon-giving voice. Mike wouldn't know, he's never been invited to any of them. And it's not a faith thing, because he knows everyone but Bev – who of course, he's sure the Rabbi thinks of as some scarlet woman temptress even though she's sixteen and has only dated the same boy for the past two years – has gone to at least one event, and none of them are Jewish. “Soon you'll be going to college, and you'll find people who are more – like you .”

There it is. He really tries not to take the bait.

“Farm people, you mean?” he says, and he's trying to keep his voice even but his pulse is racing. A long time ago, so long he can barely remember it but it stays in his memory as one of the only things he can remember about his parents, his mom is holding his hand and saying to his father – at least he thinks it was his father, but he can't even really remember the face – “Never get angry. Remember? You can't get angry.” It echoes in his head now. He can't give him the satisfaction. “Or – people who like the Proclaimers? I hope so, because it seems like I'm the only one who likes that song about walking five hundred miles. Do you know it?” he says, and he shouldn't have taken the bait but his heart is racing now. He wants to hear him say it, at least, and stop hiding behind euphemisms.

Rabbi Uris' eyes narrow dangerously, and Mike can see Stan in this but none of his humour, or his warmth. “Stan will be going to a good school soon, and he needs to keep his head down and study hard if that's going to happen,” he says, testily, colour blooming in his cheeks. “And he certainly doesn't need to likes of you dragging him down, going nowhere fast –”

"Did you give Bill this speech too?" he says, unable to keep from shaking with anger now.

Rabbi Uris looks incensed, and he colours even more. "You better watch your tone, young man. Your friend Bill is going to go to a good college, probably an Ivy, like Stan. I'm not worried about Stan associating with him, they'll have that connection through college and into adulthood."

Before he can stop himself, Mike replies, "Oh, yeah, I know. He's the white kind of friend for Stan, right? Sorry, right. My mistake." He's still not raising his voice, but he's allowed himself more visible anger than he meant, and he regrets it. Shutting the Rabbi up with that comment is viciously satisfying, though. It's short lived.

"His parents are good people. Moral people. They've raised a morally healthy son," Rabbi Uris says venomously. "Unfortunately, I can't say I believe the same of you."

Blood pounds in his ears, and a rush of righteous fury threatens to knock him over. "Oh, you're one to tell me I'm immoral, when you're –" he starts, and stops himself before he blurts out something he'll regret.

The Rabbi pales a little, and there's a flash of something almost afraid in his eyes.

Just as he's thinking he might have to leave without picking Stan up, and what in the world can be taking him so long, Stan's voice comes from behind.

"Dad, why didn't you tell me Mike was here –" he says, sounding annoyed and then he notices their faces as he comes to stand beside the Rabbi. His face falls. "What did you say?"

Neither of them says anything. Stan's expression darkens even more, and he walks toward Mike. "We're leaving. Now."

Mike doesn't need to be told twice. Rabbi Uris looks angry, and makes an odd, choked noise but doesn't stop them.

They get in the car and drive until they're away from the house, and then Mike pulls over, breathing heavy.

Neither of them says anything for a moment. Then Stan looks at him, and in a very small, remorseful voice, asks , “What did he say? You know he’s full of shit, right?”

He can’t stand to see Stan look so guilty for something that’s so wholly not his fault. He looks at him, kindly, though he can’t bring himself to smile yet. “Don’t beat yourself up, it’s not your fault. And it’s nothing I haven’t heard before.”

This doesn’t cheer Stan up much, and he sits there looking angry. “Did he tell you we shouldn’t be friends anymore?”

Mike pauses and nods.

Stan makes a wild, frustrated movement and swears. Mike is used to it by now, the way he’s like a pressure cooker, still and quiet and often disapproving but he goes along until he can’t, and then he has to let it out somehow, in bursts of concentrated anger and frustration.

He shakes his head, still vibrating with anger. “I cannot fucking believe he’d say that to you. Like, directly to you. He’s so fucking –“ he says, cutting himself off angrily because he can’t seem to find the right word to describe exactly what his Dad is.

“It’s ok, really. I’m fine,” Mike tries to reassure him. Stan doesn’t actually swear all that often, unless he’s casually telling Richie to fuck off, and these aren’t those. There’s no humour in them, just sharp, hurt edges.

Stan looks at him seriously, still looking angry. “But you’re not. The way you looked when I came out? I’ve only seen that kind of anger reserved for people like – fucking Bowers, you never let people get to you like that.”

Mike looks at him for a long moment, and wishes he wasn’t quite so perceptive, quite so attuned to his moods.

“So it wasn’t just that...” Stan realises. He looks horrified. “He didn’t say it was because you’re –“

Mike can’t look at him and agree, so he looks out at the road, and nods.

“Fuck,” Stan says quietly, furiously. “You know that I don’t – I’m not – I don’t care about –“ he starts, suddenly, anxious.

This for some reason makes Mike smile, just a little one, but there. "Of course I know that, Stan. This isn't on you."

Stan looks relieved briefly, and then frowns again. He still looks angry, but now kind of at a loss. "I just –" he starts, stops and starts again. "I don't get it. The same fuckwits who hate you around here are generally the same fuckwits who've spray-painted swastikas on the synagogue and my Dad's car. We should be fucking – sticking together, sticking up for each other, not – doing exactly what they do to us, to each other." He gasps, a sort of sigh-gasp that comes dangerously close to a sob, and Mike automatically reaches over to comfort him, putting a hand on his hand. It relaxes from its balled-up tensiity. Stan looks at him, surprised but not greatly.

He supposes neither of them know where they're at right now, how much is too much anymore. It was much easier before this year, they were affectionate then like they all are with each other, but then Bill and Bev went and got them all invited to parties, and one in particular made things weirder.

"I know. But people are going to do what they're gonna do," he says, and smiles a little more. "Maybe we can look out for each other, though?"

Stan looks a little happier, and smiles. "Deal. Do you still want to help me learn how to drive? I'll understand if you just want to hang out, or whatever."

Mike chuckles. "Yeah, I think you can't be a menace to the roads of Derry. Let's do it."

Stan grins, and Mike doesn't want to remove his hand yet, but he does so he can drive them away.

Mike hasn't thought about the Rabbi and his wife, Esther, so much in the last twenty years as he's thought about them in the last week. He might not have liked them much, Stan's mother less so but he still knew she was uncomfortable around him, but he didn't think they'd deserved to die so abruptly.

"Alright everyone," he calls for attention, after they've finished eating.

Everyone looks up, surprised.

“Jesus, that was scarily efficient, Mike,” Richie says. “Is that your teacher voice?”

“Worked, didn’t it?” he says, smiling.

Richie considers this, and nods. “I still find it deeply disturbing you work at our old high school. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, you’ve become the enemy, and we can’t trust anything you say, man.”

“As opposed to what, trusting anything you say, Trashmouth?” Stan jumps in, and Richie laughs with everyone.

“So, Stan and I are trying to sort through this stuff here, and we could use your help. Many hands and all,” Mike continues. “You don’t have to but let’s be real, what else are you going to do around here?”

Everyone laughs again.

“Well, I only ever used to hang out at the barrens, which I’m not gonna do by myself, and the arcade/theatre, and that seems to have been closed since the Bush administration, so, guess I’ll help,” Richie jokes, smirking.

“Thanks for deigning to help, Rich,” Eddie snarks back, sarcastically.

“Oh no I love to help, Eds, particularly like with your mom –“ Richie starts.

“Seriously, *fuck you* –“ Eddie retorts, taking the bait furiously.

Mike looks at Stan, who is shaking his head.

“*Anyway*,” he says purposefully, in best his trying-to-move-the-lesson-along tone. It silences the two of them for the meantime. “There a few rooms, who’s in?”

Everyone agrees heartily, like this is the reason they came. It gives them an excuse to be here that isn’t so obviously painful. It’s a

manageable kind of sadness, distant. They could hardly be as upset about the accidental deaths of their old friends' parents. Better than the intentional death of their son.

Having been given a room to work on, Richie and Eddie get stuck into cataloguing and sorting through the storage boxes. Or, more accurately, Eddie does this while Richie attempts it, getting distracted by random bric-a-brac and thinking up burns to use on Eddie.

"Y'know, I can't say that a week ago I would have found the idea of sorting and packing Stan's dead parents stuff up from their old house in fucking Derry particularly enjoyable," Richie says, pulling things out randomly from a box. "And I'd say that hasn't really changed," he continues, with a smirk "But even then, this is kind of weirdly more fun than I'd expect."

"Richie, you can't just randomly pull shit out and call it sorted, you have to try and figure out what we can throw out and what we're asking Stan about," Eddie says exasperatedly, looking at what Richie's doing.

Richie looks at Eddie's neat system of two piles. "Aw, but if I did it right you wouldn't be able to scold me about it. I know that's your favourite part, Eds."

"Don't call me Eds," comes the automatic, if weary reply. "None of this is my favourite thing to do, Richie, but I'm trying to make Stan's life easier, not harder, or has that not fucking occurred to you?"

"But you love it, secretly. Sorting and organising. Ordering me around, like a little general. Or an angrier, whiter Marie Kondo. I bet your sock drawer is beautifully organised," Richie replies, grinning.

Eddie raises a finger, like he's going to say something angry, but he just shakes his head and goes back to packing. After a moment he looks back at Richie. "Hang on, shouldn't it be angrier, whiter, *male* Marie Kondo, anyway?"

Richie grins. He never gets sick of pulling the trap with Eddie. "I

don't know, should it?"

"Fuck you, Richie," Eddie says, with feeling. Richie laughs and Eddie throws a pen at him.

"Edward! Throwing Stan's parents belongings about after you just got pissy about me not doing it right!" he scolds him, just to see the face Eddie will make at him.

Eddie doesn't disappoint. It might actually kill him, how little Eddie has actually changed. How easy it is to wind him up, even after this long. He can't remember the last time they saw each other – it had to be some time in college, although their breaks never seemed to line up much and they certainly hadn't had the money to visit each other's coasts. It must have been some rare occasion they were both back here, visiting parents.

Richie's always been the one to go a little too far, he's always had a dumb sense of humour, and any of his childhood friends would agree to that. But there was something about the way Eddie especially fuelled it instead of letting him burn himself out that made it so satisfying to do. Something about the way it feels like a familiar dance, something you haven't done in years but then you hear the music and the muscle memory returns, something about that is why he continues to do it now. Eddie's the only one who knows the steps, even if he complains about them.

Well, the mean little voice in his head says, that's not the only reason you're so focused on him.

He watches Eddie methodically sort, and pretends to be paying attention to his own box.

Shut up, little voice. He thinks. This is why we invented compartmentalisation, for fuck's sake.

They've just turned sixteen, and Richie feels like things are actually going well for him for once. He's not doing badly in school, because his friends are horrible and are making him revise for tests with them, and he actually knows the material but apparently actually applying yourself to it makes a difference – jumps of minuses to pluses, a little bump to his GPA,

but it's not like he wasn't getting good marks before, he just was constantly bullshitting his way through it. He's also trying to not get in trouble so much in class, because if all his reports ever say is that he fucked around in class, no good, distant college will ever want him. And since Bill pointed this out – later seconded by everyone else – that he'd need all of this to get the fuck out of this town, he's going to make sure he has it.

He's dated two girls, both of whom were pretty hot, not for very long but he doesn't want to be tied into a long-term relationship. And as much as he loves Bill and Bev, because they're two of his best friends in the whole world, he can't fathom why they want to be in this Serious Relationship that they've basically officially been in since they were fourteen. He can't tell them this, though, Bev would kill him.

Ok, so there was the milkshake incident with his first girlfriend, Debbie, but that was so early in the year he's basically forgotten it.

And it's a sunny day, and he's going to the ice-cream shop to buy ice-creams for him and Eddie. Stan put in a good word for him at the theatre, and he's trying not to mess that up on Stan's behalf so he's actually got money for things like ice-cream and videogames right now. It's the start of eleventh grade, and Richie feels untouchable.

He's also just made a really great mixtape, one with that song by The Cure that he's been listening to on and off for months. He suspects it could be kind of cheesy in anyone else's hands, but they manage to make happy love songs sound cool and grown-up.

He walks to the shop, listening to it on his Walkman. Derry, even, looks nice in the sun. It's not actually so bad a town, even if he can't wait to be away from it in two years.

Monday you can fall apart, Tuesday, Wednesday, break my heart, Oh Thursday, doesn't even start, it's Friday I'm in love,

He listens to the lyrics, he basically knows them off by heart now, and enjoys the walk.

The ice-cream shop has glass windows, and it's fairly busy, but he picks out Eddie's dorky little shorts and tube socks fairly quickly. He smiles to

himself, and then realises he's talking to someone, and pulls his headphones off.

"What the fuck?" he says to himself, and he doesn't actually mean to say it out loud and startle a passing family with little twin girls, but he does.

He's talking to a girl. He can't see properly, but it looks like Carrie Jennings. Why would Carrie talk to him? She's way cooler on the social hierarchy than them, and she barely acknowledges Richie. And Richie is definitely cooler than Eddie, so why would she be seen talking to him? In public?

He enters the shop and makes his way towards them. Maybe they've been partnered up on a project? Although Eddie would have said something if he'd gotten someone like her as a partner. Maybe he didn't in a futile attempt at not getting Richie to tease him about it. Well, that's about to fail miserably.

Eddie's actually smiling, albeit in a nervous kind of way. He can hear Carrie kind of – giggling? That doesn't sound like they're just discussing homework. Her laugh isn't as cute as he thought, in fact it's kind of grating. She's holding a vanilla ice-cream cone, so she already has her ice-cream, so why is she still here giggling in front of a kid who wears the terrible shorts his Mom buys and hasn't started shaving yet?

She looks at him, beaming, and says something he can't hear and then turns to go, looking distinctly giggly. She's wearing a pink, white and cream striped dress and her skin looks even more weirdly pale against it, next to her long, dark curls. She smiles at Richie as she passes, but all he can do is look at her in total confusion. One does not leave a conversation with Eddie Kaspbrak giggling. Laughing, yes, sniggering, yes, but giggling? Girl-type giggling? It boggles the mind.

He walks up to Eddie, who looks so dazed he doesn't notice him for a moment. "Ed. Eddie. Spaghetti man. Eds. Hello," Richie says, and Eddie almost jumps. He doesn't complain about any of the nicknames though, which is a bad sign.

"Hi Rich," Eddie says faintly. He doesn't elaborate, so Richie decides to just ask.

"What did Carrie Jennings want with you?" he asks, in a bigger, jokier voice. "Did she need a living garden gnome? I've always said you'd be good in that line of work, bud. You could sit there and frown at everyone —"

Eddie looks at him, almost looking as confused as Richie feels. "She asked me on a date? Next Saturday?"

Richie feels briefly like someone's smacked a pillow square into his face and he's struggling to get it off. If he was confused now, he's entirely fucking dumbfounded now. He struggles for something to say and only ends up saying, "You?" lamely.

Eddie nods slowly, like he can't quite believe it either. Most worryingly, now, is the fact that normally Eddie would have retorted to the implied insult there.

Richie tries to regain his composure. "Maybe it's like a make-a-wish thing? Did you tell her that you're terminal? Does she just think that because of the inhaler?" he says, attempting his jokey voice again. "Maybe it's a prank?"

Eddie reddens, and Richie thinks, fucking finally. "Is it that hard to think a girl might like me?" he says, annoyed.

Richie smirks. "Honestly, I can't begin to understand the kind of addled mind of a person who'd want to date you, Eds, but I guess there's a lid for every pot."

Eddie scowls.

Richie chuckles, throwing an arm around him, too big, too exaggerated, but oh well. "Aw, if I buy you an ice-cream will you stop scowling? It's a sunny day outside. The world is full of possibilities. What do you want?"

Eddie squirms and rolls his eyes, but he stops scowling. "Can you get me vanilla?"

Richie feels his grin drop. "Sure, if you want to be totally lame. Which would work for you, actually. But I said I'd get you one, and I'll get you one. Even if it is boring fucking white-picket fence Church on Sundays two point five kids vanilla," he says, and he knows this is a stupid thing to be

annoyed about but it doesn't stop him being annoyed about it, and he storms forward, hearing Eddie's baffled-and-annoyed "What?" behind him.

It's fine, he tells himself. It's fine. This stupid thing – obsession – crush he's had for the last three or so years isn't burning itself out, but it's not like he wants anything to happen. It's usually fine, it's just like sometimes Eddie gets really frustrated and his face gets all pinched and Richie feels a powerful wave of affection for him, and sometimes he wants to sweep his hair out of his face when they're reading comic books together, and it's all fine and normal and a common effect of spending so much time with your male friends, as that one book he stole from the library said, and it's all very reassuring except for how he doesn't have the same thing with any of the other guys, even though he would give any one of them a kidney. It also hasn't happened with Bev, who he also spends a lot of time with and would also donate a kidney to, and it's sometimes just the two of them, and he loves her but he's not in love with her, which is good because she's dating his best friend and also Ben is already playing that role and she doesn't seem to know. But it's not good, and he knows why.

Same reason he got dumped once and broke up with the other girl this year, even if Debbie didn't quite know it when she dumped him. He knew, with both of them that something was missing, or wrong. This isn't how teenage boys feel around teenage girls, not normal ones. The problem is he's been playing it up for so long that he sometimes fools himself into thinking that it actually is him.

He can't face it, at least not when he's sober and even then, he's never said it. He can barely think it. But it's there. In the back of his mind. Wanting to make Eddie laugh and annoy him into paying him attention. Hopeless. Absolute fucking lost cause.

"So, Eddie," Richie starts, surprising himself.

"What?" Eddie says, in a suspicious but resigned tone.

"What does your wife think about you being here?" Richie continues, seriously. Well as seriously as he can muster.

"I swear to God, Richie, I'm going to smother you in your sleep," Eddie mutters irritably.

Richie cackles. “Just as long as your little angry face is the last thing I see before I go. I find it comforting.”

Eddie makes a strangling motion with his hands, then drops them, shaking his head.

Richie keeps looking over at him. “No, really, I’m not being an asshole,”

Eddie snorts. “That’s a world first,”

Richie throws the pen Eddie had thrown back at him, attempting not to smirk. “No, Eds, you absolute maniac – I’m actually asking. What did you tell her?”

Eddie scowls, looking deeply disbelieving. His eyebrows might actually kill Richie. They might actually gain sentience and then *they’ll* be the ones to smother him in his sleep. Richie can’t help smiling.

Eddie shakes his head. “You don’t care what I told Myra, man. I know your game. You want me to say something, so you can embarrass me with it. Or you’re trying to get out of sorting. Or both.”

Richie adopts a nonchalant voice. “Why would I be able to embarrass you with it, Eds?”

Eddie narrows his eyes even more. Soon he physically won’t be able to see. “*Richie*,” he says, long-sufferingly. “Don’t call me that.”

Richie throws his hands up defensively, but he can’t help laughing. “Hey, I didn’t leave anything but beer in my fridge. And maybe some meat. And maybe some old Chinese...” he trails off, thinking. A tic goes in Eddie’s face. He’s probably thinking of how he’d clean it out, bless his little type-A heart. “But a few of us actually have marriages, however horrifyingly, and from what I hear they’re not super chill if you want to go back to your hometown and drop everything to hang out with your childhood friends, especially without them,” he says, with a laugh in his voice, although he’s actually curious now.

Eddie stares at him suspiciously for a moment. He opens his mouth and then closes it. “Ok, sure...just know, I’m going to fucking murder

you if this is a joke,” he starts, suspiciously.

Richie grins. “Noted.”

Eddie shrugs, and looks down at the stuff he’s sorting. “She didn’t really get it, why I had to come. I was out of contact with most of you guys by the time we met, so – she just didn’t get why suddenly these friends were so important, when I don’t talk about them to her.”

“Well, thanks for that, Eds,” he says, half-joking. “Missed you too.”

Eddie flips him off, without looking at him. “Don’t call me that,” he says automatically. He looks up at Richie, and he looks strange. “You know I crashed my car, just after Mike called? I was so – I don’t know, I’d been thinking about dumb work shit, and stressing about that, and I was talking to Myra, and she was stressing about the storm front, or something, and I didn’t even know the number. I just picked up because it said Maine, and I felt like I had to.”

Richie nods, and looks back at him. “I threw up, you know,” he says, with an odd little half-laugh. Remembering it is weird and kind of horrible, and he can’t summon the energy for a full laugh. “When Mike called. He actually – somehow – contacted my agent, and got my number from him, and he must have been convincing as hell because it’s not like Gerry just gives my number out to anyone, y’know? And all I saw was that it was from Maine. I felt like I knew it was bad, even before I answered, but like I had to pick up?”

Eddie looks a little surprised, but vindicated too. “Yeah, I think from that moment, I just –“ he looks down for a moment, then back up, looking strange again. His eyes are little too-red rimmed, but he half-smiles in an odd, rueful way. “I was at his wedding, you know? He’s one of my best friends. Or – was, I don’t know. It’s fucking *Stan*. Even if I hadn’t seen him in years, why wouldn’t I go? And I just told her that it was an emergency, and that I had to go. I couldn’t not *be here*,” he says, a little bitterly.

“Sounds like it went well,” Richie deadpans.

Eddie gives him a look. “Yeah, it went *great*,” he says sarcastically,

and then looks away again. “I don’t know what I’d even have done if – if he hadn’t made it,” he says, in a very small voice, and Richie would make any kind of dumb joke or bad impression just to get him to stop sounding like that. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen him, but it actually hurt, when Mike told me what happened. I don’t – I don’t get how it still means so much, after all this time.”

Richie can’t look at him, so he looks down at the things he’s pulled out of the box. Old books and things. “At the risk of getting dangerously close to being serious,” he says, half-joke, more confident than he feels with his nerves jangling and his heart beating a little too much. “It – totally fucked me up to hear about him, too,” he says, tapping a finger on the book he’s supposedly looking at. “I think some people – make a mark on you, and it doesn’t go away. Even after – like, decades,” he says, and looks up, like an idiot.

Eddie’s looking at him curiously, suddenly. He opens his mouth, maybe to say something, but Richie can’t take any of this anymore, and so he continues. “Like your mom, who I know I’ll never forget,” he says, and grins.

Eddie’s eyes flash, confusion then dawning rage. He’s still for a moment, like he’s in shock. Then he speaks. “I am going to *fucking strangle you Richie!*” he says, and lunges at Richie, who moves back, cackling.

Richie can still feel his pulse racing though, still feels like an idiot. He almost got too close to it there – he doesn’t remember the last time he was honest like that. He’s never honest like that. It reminds him of sleepovers with the guys (and later with everyone), staying up next to Eddie in the late night-early morning, just talking honestly. Somehow the darkness, or the lateness made it easier for him to just talk, without having to joke around or insult Eddie.

He’s going to have to watch it, or he’s going to end up accidentally admitting something incredibly stupid to Eddie. Who might be married to an awful-sounding woman, but he is still married. To a woman.

Notes for the Chapter:

And we're back! I take super long to update, but when I do it's monster chapters like this, so hopefully it was enjoyable! Thanks for sticking with it, if you have been, let me know what you thought cause I'd love to hear it :))

4. Roll Up Your Sleeves (Everything's Going To Be Alright)

Notes for the Chapter:

and it's back! I always feel like i have things i want to note here but by the time I get to uploading I've forgotten all of them. Thanks for sticking with it :) apparently all of these chapters are going to be super long, because i'm a disaster and i cannot be stopped, but enjoy!

(and many many thanks to the glorious @manycolouredays, foul-weather friend and brilliant beta, who I haven't acknowledged yet because of said forgetting anything important I need to say whenever I finally get the chapters ready for upload!)

Everyone ends up circling back to the living room after a while, bringing stuff out to the box that's going to be donated and the box that's going to the dump.

They all ask his opinion, but Stan trusts their judgement. He can't get caught up in the minutiae of it all. He might keep a few things for sentimentality, but most of it will either have to be sold, donated or thrown out.

Everyone works in easy silence, not getting too caught up – until Stan opens his next box. It's not labelled.

He pulls out an old pair of binoculars. "Oh shit, I think these were my first birding binoculars..." he says with a quiet, nostalgic smile.

Ben, who is working near him, looks up and smiles. "Hey I – I remember those. The number of times I saw you with those around your neck..."

He smiles reminiscently, and goes to stand around Stan's box. "What box is this?" he asks, curiously, pulling at something in it.

"I don't know, I just started on it. I could've sworn they'd thrown these out though," Stan says in disbelief, motioning to the binoculars.

Ben gasps in excitement and disbelief, pulling something long and colourful out of the box. "No way man, I can't believe they kept this! Is this like all your childhood stuff they couldn't bear to throw away?"

"Whaaat, noooo...." Stan half-whispers, picking up an end of the long, stripy knitted scarf Ben is currently looking at with reverent joy. "My Tom Baker scarf? I cannot *believe* I'm looking at this!"

Ben beams, winding it around Stan's neck. It looks smaller now, obviously. It's still as soft. "You know, add a long coat and maybe a waistcoat, you'd kind of look like him, with your curls," Ben says, appraisingly.

Stan chuckles, sceptically. "I think I'm a *little* old for Doctor Who cosplay, Ben."

Ben grins. "Hey, there's no point being grown up –" he starts, and Stan can't help grinning, finishing his sentence.

"– if you can't be a little childish sometimes," he finishes, and Ben laughs delightedly.

"I can't believe we both still remember that," he says, smiling widely.

"Me either," Stan says, still grinning. "I still remember emailing you when I heard about the tv movie in college. I was so excited, damn."

Ben grins in recognition. "I remember that! That *movie*. Wasn't it like, a half-US production? It was – not what I was expecting."

Stan grimaces, and chuckles. "No, me neither. Half-human, honestly."

Ben makes a derisive noise in agreement.

"Did you ever watch any of the new series?" Stan asks.

Ben makes a so-so hand motion. "I remember liking that first season, I don't know, what, ten years ago? Even though it wasn't really like

Doctor Who, it was kind of fun and nostalgic. I really liked that Doctor though.”

“Yeah, I remember being like, he’s got *it*, you know, the kind of energy that Tom Baker had.”

Ben nods, expression clouded over with nostalgia. “I liked that one... kind of dropped off after that season. I was busy working, and I didn’t really, uh, have any other fans to watch it with,” he says, a little melancholy right at the end.

Stan thinks about when it came out. “Patty and I watched it for a bit together, but I think then we got into other shows. It came out the uh, year we got married...” he says, trailing off and looking down at the scarf, feeling awkward suddenly.

Stan feels the material of it with one hand. Sense memory, every time it rubbed against his neck, the way it felt between his fingers. “I can’t believe Mom kept this.”

They watched tapes of it, over and over, went over to each other’s house to watch it. Committed it to memory. No one liked it the way they did, it wasn’t a group activity. It was too British, or too boring, or not gory enough, or too cheesy or any number of reasons. Regardless, they’d been shocked and horrified to hear that after twenty-five years on air, the current season would be the last. They’d been horrified there wouldn’t be any more, but really, their favourite Doctor was a few ones back anyway, so they could just watch their tapes of him.

It had been on his fourteenth birthday that she’d given it to him. He’d been talking about the scarf a lot with Ben, the whole mad-professor look, but it was the scarf that he loved the most. She’d knitted it herself, must have taken ages.

He hugged her after he unwrapped it, his most exciting present – not that he even had many – next to the sort of practical things his father thought he should have, but were in no way exciting.

“I can’t believe you did this – I love it so much!” he said, rapt.

She beamed at him, winding it around his neck. “It gets so cold around

here in the winter, darling. I thought you deserved a scarf that you'd like. I'm sure I don't understand that show so much, but I appreciate how happy you look talking with your friend about it."

He smiled, and hugged her again. "I love it," he said into her shoulder.

Ben gives him an empathetic smile. There's some quality in him, still, that makes it seem like empathy and affection comes off him in waves, leaks out of his pores, that he would do anything to fix things and make it better. He was always good at that, which is maybe why he's an architect. He knows how to fix old things and build new and better things from there.

"She worked hard on it, she wasn't going to throw it out, right?" Ben replies, quietly.

Stan nods slowly.

"She was always kind to me. I appreciated that." Ben says, after a moment.

Stan looks at him, and smiles a little. "She was good like that."

Someone wolf-whistles, breaking the reverent memory – perhaps for the best, otherwise he might have started to cry.

They look over in the direction of the sound. Richie looks confusedly back at them. "What's with the scarf?"

"You don't remember it?" Ben calls, sounding surprised.

"Should I?" Richie asks, then narrows his eyes. "Wait, it's coming back to me. It's part of your old nerd shit that you guys were obsessed with right?"

Stan snorts. "Oh, our nerd shit, coming from the guy who wouldn't miss an episode of Star Trek: TNG?"

"And who almost wore out his Star Wars tapes rewatching them too much?" Ben adds, smiling.

Richie scoffs. "Star Wars is basically mainstream now anyway,

everyone and their mother saw that new one last year.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, still makes you a nerd,” Stan returns, grinning.

“Coming from the guy in the *Doctor Who* scarf, that really hurts, man,” Richie volleys, grinning.

“I knew you knew what it was!” Stan replies, chuckling.

Ben is sorting through a small box within the box they’re sorting, and he looks up again excitedly, pulling something out of it. “Rich, get over here, you have to see this,”

Richie raises an eyebrow, but comes over.

Ben is holding a cassette tape with a decorated label, and he hands it over to Richie. “Remember this one?”

“Nooo...” Richie says in delighted disbelief, examining it. “This was one of my best ones! Your parents really *did* keep all the shit you didn’t take to college, huh. Come to that, what the fuck, man? You didn’t take this with you, after all the hard work I put in? The drawings I did on the cover?”

Stan gives him a look. “You got Bill to do those for you.”

Richie throws up his hands in mock outrage. “I outsourced! Do you remember how hard it was to make these little bastards?”

Stan grins. “You realise this isn’t even one of the ones you made just for me? I took all of *them*! Maybe even this one, I had to send stuff back when I graduated, stuff got mixed in that I didn’t mean to send back.”

Richie narrows his eyes, then nods like he’s going to accept this. “Man, I thought I’d be embarrassed by my teenage self’s music taste, but no, apparently I’ve always had great taste. This shit *still* fucks,” he says, looking over the track listing.

Ben shakes his head, grinning.

“And so humble, as always,” Stan replies drily, but Richie doesn’t respond. He hands it over to Stan.

“Tell me I’m wrong, then,” he says, smirking.

Stan looks at it. It’s compact in his hand, he’d forgotten how small these things were. He kind of misses the physicality of this kind of music – your Spotify playlist doesn’t get destroyed by accidentally tangling the black tape inside it, but you can’t touch it either. It was kind of special to have a compilation like this, and it isn’t anymore, now that you’ve got everything at your fingertips.

The front cover is a skilled drawing of a dragon – no way that Richie did it, but he’d forgotten how good Bill was back then. He remembers a drawing on one of the personalised ones Richie gave him, another dragon, but wearing glasses and a tiny yarmulke. That part was almost certainly on Richie’s instruction, but it makes him grin to think about. The title of the one he’s holding proclaims, in coloured letters, *Richie’s Losers Mix ’94*.

Senior year then, he thinks. How did he end up with this one? Maybe someone left it in his old cassette player after a party or something, and it never went back to Richie. He reads the track listing on the back. The first track is *Mr Jones – Counting Crows*. Not surprising, Richie had been obsessed with that album when it’d come out the year before, and had not stopped being so the next year. Stan had always found their stuff a bit mournful, but he liked this song.

“Oh *no*,” Ben says, and he looks up, but something about his tone still seems oddly delighted. Then he sees what Ben is hauling out of the box, and shakes his head. “Oh no, what’ve you done,” he says, and Richie whoops.

“We *have* to play it now. It’s a sign,” Richie says.

“We don’t even know if it works anymore, it’s been over twenty years –” Stan points out, but Richie will not be dissuaded.

“Bill, look what we’ve found! *And* one of my best mixes!” Richie says, calling him over.

"Your old tape p-player?" Bill says incredulously to Stan, coming over to look. "Does it work? I think I saw some b-batteries in the kitchen. I'll go and see if I can find them," he says, and hurries off.

Richie grins. "See this is why Bill is the leader. He thinks of solutions, instead of bringing me problems."

Stan snorts. "I can think of a few occasions where he brought us problems," he says with dark humour.

Richie laughs. "Dark, but not untrue."

"He is good at finding solutions, though," Ben adds and Stan nods in agreement.

"Unless it's writing an ending to one of his books," Richie snarks, and they both groan.

Having abandoned any pretence of keeping going with their stuff, Mike, Bev and Eddie come over to look at what's going on.

"Beep beep, Richie," Bev says, almost hiding her smile, squeezing in next to him.

"What?" Richie asks, like he doesn't know why he's eliciting this response. "He *knows*."

"Aw, Big Bertha," Mike says nostalgically, looking at the boombox. "I never thought I'd see her again."

Stan laughs, remembering. "I forgot you named it."

"Trying to remove the old batteries could be dangerous, just so you know, they might have exploded or anything in that –" Eddie starts, eyeing it suspiciously.

"Live a little, Grandma Kaspbrak! Remember your youth!" Richie cuts him off, and then feigns stopping to think. "Wait, you were always like this, right."

Eddie flips him off. Stan puts the tape down, and Eddie picks it up, scanning the back.

"I remember this one. You got obsessed with Pixies and you and Bev kept playing *Where is my Mind* all the time," Eddie says, shaking his head.

"I have no regrets over our teen angst, that song is still good," Bev retorts, but she's grinning.

"I put *Basket Case* on there for you, obviously, Eds," Richie says, and his voice is over-loud and jokey.

"Fuck off, Richie," Eddie says, but he's fighting a smile. He had seemingly liked that song a lot, even though he didn't otherwise seem to get Richie's Green Day obsession.

"*Cornflake Girl* for you, Bev, because you played it until it stuck in my head for the rest of senior year," Richie says, looking over at her.

"Oh please, you loved it," Bev dismisses him easily. She's got the tape off Eddie. "Aw, Weezer. I haven't heard *Buddy Holly* in years." She smiles mischievously at Richie. "You *still* look just like Buddy Holly."

The rest of the guys laugh.

"Well, you're no Mary Tyler Moore." Richie returns weakly, grinning.

Bill comes back having actually managed to find batteries. "We really have to sort out that junk drawer, Stan, there's just a lot of random shit in there," he says, giving him the batteries.

Stan prises off the battery pack cover, and it's fine. The ancient batteries in there are a brand that he's pretty sure doesn't exist anymore, but he pulls them out. They're not going to get this to work, surely. It's ancient, and a bit dusty, although it has been fastidiously packed away.

"I don't expect this to work, ok, guys," he says, but everyone's watching with excitement anyway. It's almost like a direct line to the past if they can get something like this to work. He puts the cassette in the tape holder, then puts the batteries in, replaces the cover and switches it on. A light goes on, and he feels an inexplicable jolt of excitement. He presses play and even though the quality isn't the best, Adam Duritz's voice sha-la-la-la-la-la's out of the speakers, and a

cheer goes up from everyone.

He hasn't heard this song since maybe college, but hearing it is pure high school. Playing on the radio, in the background of hanging out at Richie's house with others, in Richie's terrifying old car.

They're more cheered by the discovery of an old photo album, and for a moment they're lost in time, forgetting all the worst parts of senior year with nostalgic music and snapshots taken at happy moments. Some badly angled or out of focus, some clearly taken by a competent parent. They pass Beck's *Loser* looking at old Halloween costumes and birthdays in the basement just below them.

Then they get to the end of the photo album, and a few photos that give Stan a jolt like the past has just punched him in the gut. He's been getting that feeling a lot recently.

"What's that one?" asks Bill. "Oh that's – " he says, softer.

"Prom," Bev says, warmly, taking it out off the book after Stan nods. "God, look at that dress," she says, a laugh in her tone. "Making my own prom dress was maybe my peak Molly Ringwald moment."

Bill shakes his head. "Well, unlike her in that m-movie, you actually knew how to m-make a dress that looked good. It looked really – beautiful," he says, smiling at her. It's one of those moments bound up in the nostalgia of two people who used to love each other a lot, and it's weird to be around. They all knew so much about each other, but it reminds him sharply that there were things shared just between the two of them, a closeness no-one could touch. His fingertips feel strange against the photo album for a moment.

Ben doesn't look particularly happy. Eddie looks anxious. Richie looks annoyed at the memory. Mike looks – he accidentally catches Mike's eye and then looks back at Bev.

Bev hands him the photo, and everyone looks at it. Come to think of it, everyone looks strange in this photo, too. Bill in his tux, and Bev looking radiant in her green dress, simple but effectively pretty. Both of them beaming, very close. Eddie and his girlfriend, Carrie, her smiling and looking nice, him looking like he was about to sit to an

exam, not go to a dance . Ben and Mike standing next to each other, Mike smiling, one arm around a more downbeat-looking Ben, and his other around Richie, pulling a face in his white tuxedo jacket and a very loud shirt. It must have been taken outside Bill's house, he recognises it in the background, and maybe he'd asked for a copy. He can't think why, because he looks kind of awkward and a little annoyed in this one, next to Rachel Adler, his high school girlfriend of about a year and a half, wearing something purple and stiff-looking, with a lot of bows. She's smiling for the photo, but he can see in her eyes that she's annoyed too. And he remembers it.

"Can you help me with this, Stan?" Rachel asks, a bite in her tone. She's readjusting her corsage, and he doesn't know what she needs his help with but he helps her all the same.

"Thanks," she says, and softens a little. "You sure we can't skip out after the photos and get dinner just us?"

He's taken aback by this. He knew she wasn't thrilled that he wanted to meet up with his friends beforehand and get dinner as a group, but he thought she had accepted it given that they were all now together and had only made plans to be together, before they went to Prom.

"What? I – we're going to go out to eat with everyone, remember? And anyway, nothing would have any room at this point."

She frowns, and her eyes go steely again. "Of course. You're always right, Stan," she snipes.

"I just thought we'd agreed to this, and I don't want to be rude – " Stan replies, trying not to let his irritation show. She'd never quite clicked with his friends, but she'd always been happy enough to go to parties and such with them. Of course, it probably wasn't really about them. They'd been getting into all these little fights recently, probably partly to do with exam stress – before she'd got her Yale acceptance she'd been totally wigged out about it, which hadn't helped his own anxiety before he got his Princeton acceptance – and he knew, probably as much as she did, that they weren't going to last long-distance.

"Of course," she says derisively, under her breath. "Wouldn't want to offend your precious little club."

"No I wouldn't," he snaps, letting his frustration get the better of him. He takes a moment. "I'm sorry, can we just try to have a good night, Rach?" he asks quietly, and says after a beat. "Please?"

She frowns at him for a moment, then nods. "Alright. Let's try," she says, with a small, conciliatory smile. He smiles a little, but he can tell it's not really fixed.

"Ok everyone, gather up, I want to take one of you all. If it's nice enough you can keep a copy, and look back on it, and laugh about how mistaken you were with your fashions," Bill's dad says. He's not usually a joker, that's generally Went Tozier's role, but he seems proud and light tonight, even attempting a few jokes. He can't imagine what he'd do if his dad started trying to be jokey and light. He couldn't even picture Ari Uris making a joke.

He looks around. Bev and Bill are looking at each other moonily, and he's both happy for them and annoyed at them in the moment. He can't remember the last time he and Rachel looked at each other like that, although they definitely did once. Eddie looks like he can't believe his date, but he's had that expression regularly since she first asked him out. Richie is fucking around near Ben and Mike, having been corralled away from messing with Eddie by Mike. He looks wild, but he can't imagine Richie wearing anything like your average tux. Ben looks down, and Stan's pretty sure the reasons are standing close together further down the lawn, looking at each other like they can't see anyone else. Mike seems to be trying to cheer him up, smiling openly. That's Mike for you, always trying to make sure everyone else is ok.

He catches Mike's eye, and Mike smiles at him. He smiles back, feeling happier already. Mike just has that effect on people – out of them, he should be one of the most pissed off, he should be an angry kid and he isn't. Just relentlessly positive, mostly. Stan doesn't know why he didn't bring a date, because he knows for a fact that at least two girls wanted to go with him, but he said he'd prefer to go stag with Richie and Ben and not have to worry about anything else. Maybe he's just being nice though, because Richie's been in a worse mood than usual lately and there's only one girl Ben would have wanted to ask anyway . Looking after people at his own expense, again.

Everyone gets into a line for the group photo. The couples stand together.

Rachel makes an annoyed noise that he can't figure out. Ben stands next to him, attempting to smile, or at least not look openly miserable.

"You right?" he says in undertone.

"Yeah, it's fine," Ben says, attempting casualness.

"We're good," Mike says, throwing his arms around Ben and Richie's shoulders.

"Fuckin' dandy, Stanley," Richie says, humour a little sharper edged than usual.

"Alright, 1-2-3," Bill's dad calls, and everyone faces the camera. Rachel puts on a smile he knows she isn't feeling. He doesn't think he even manages one.

"Great night," says Richie, voice dripping with irony. He compartmentalises a lot for fun and profit, but this is something he put in a box a long time ago, writing do not open and storing it at the very back of his brain. He can't believe how old they thought they were at the time, and how young they look now. "Messing with couples at prom is a true punk tradition."

*Eddie looks annoyed already, which is great. "God, you *were* extra irritating that night, I almost forgot."*

"Honestly, I'm surprised you can remember any of it, Rich. Weren't you pretty drunk?" Bev adds, like she's remembering it again.

"You were?" Bill asks, sounding surprised. Of course he didn't notice, the gym could have exploded around them and if he was dancing with Bev he wouldn't have realised.

"Pretty drunk," he says, using exaggerated air quotes. "Not my fault everyone but my buddy Ben was too square to party," he says, elbowing Ben matily.

"God, I wish I hadn't just remembered that," Ben says, sounding embarrassed. "So hungover. I can't believe no one saw that hipflask."

Richie grins. "I'm a stealthy guy. I kept it my jacket, and it just looked like we were drinking punch. In hindsight, I should have spiked the punch bowl. Then it could really have been a fun night."

"Which would have ended with you being arrested, asshole," Eddie snaps.

Mike groans. "I'm so glad none of my students have come close to your chaotic energy man, chaperoning dances is already the worst."

He shrugs at both of them like, you win some you lose some. "A lot of people would have remembered me as a legend. Certainly for the service I did for trying to stop you inflicting your dancing on the world, Eds."

Eddie's eyebrows narrow and slope. It never fails to get him, the way they do that. "Don't call me that. You were really on another level that night. I thought Carrie was gonna break up with me!" He looks over at Stan, looking guilty. "Uh, sorry Stan."

Stan looks confused for a moment, then smiles a little. "Yeah, I'm gonna say it's been over twenty years, I think I'm over being dumped on prom night." He looks at Richie. "I'm not over you throwing up on my shoes, though . That was fucked up."

Richie grimaces, sheepish. "And your pants, a little bit." Everyone groans. "Just being honest!"

He cocks his head a little, putting something together. "Is that why she dumped you? Because you smelled like vomit?"

Stan gives him a deeply Stan look. "I'm sure it didn't help. But no, she dumped me because I helped Mike take your drunk ass home and let you crash at mine. Especially since the only reason you could crash is because my parents were out of town that weekend. She wasn't particularly thrilled that I was choosing to stay with you guys instead of her."

"Because you had made," Richie pauses for effect and wiggles his eyebrows. "*Plans* for that night?"

Stan rolls his eyes. "Oh my god, you really never matured past

adolescence, huh?”

” Richie returns, grinning. He doesn’t remember much of prom past photos, and throwing up, and being shepherded into Mike’s truck and the vague memory of crashing in Stan’s bed. On the whole that night isn’t exactly fond memories. He remembers feeling guilty for ruining Stan’s night. It can’t have exactly been the kind of prom night with an empty house he was imagining.

“That is ridiculous, you were trying to help your friend.” Bev says, incredulously. “She never liked us much though.”

Stan nods, with a small smile. “Yeah. So I don’t regret it that much.”

Mike smiles a little at this. “Alright enough reminiscing, let’s get back to it,” he says, and everyone grumbles, but goes back to what they were doing before.

Richie works for a bit, sorting through some old birthday cards that he’s sure he can throw out.

The music ticks over to The Cranberries, *Linger*, and he’d read it there on the tape label but he’d forgotten how it felt to hear it. Maybe it’s being here again, too.

Everyone is doing their own thing, but he can sense a weird, nostalgic mood in the room. Maybe it’s the time they spent reminiscing just now, maybe it’s something else.

If you, if you could return/ Don't let it burn/ Don't let it fade/ I'm sure I'm not being rude/ But it's just your attitude

He kind of wishes it wasn’t playing – it’s easy to defend *Mr Jones*, or *Loser* or even *Come Out And Play* as songs he’d liked, but it’s harder to explain what he liked about *Linger* without having to admit some real big things.

He watches Eddie methodically sorting, and smiles, and then gets sprung when Eddie looks up. Eddie looks suspicious, and annoyed. “What?”

He grins, and acts nonchalant. “Nothing, Eddie Bear. Go back to

sorting.”

Eddie frowns and raises a hand, palm flat like a blade, but doesn't say anything. Then shakes his head, muttering.

He looks over and Ben is staring at Bev in the same way. She's helping Bill out with whatever he's doing, and Richie hopes for his sake he'll look away before the same thing happens to him.

He's about to go out for a smoke, or something, just to get away from the tedium of sorting through someone's else's random family history packed up into boxes, when something falls out of the stack of cards he's packing up.

It's an addressed envelope. He picks it up and notices firstly, that it's got weight to it, and secondly, that it's addressed to *Mike Hanlon, Sackett Farm, Derry ME 04401*. He almost calls out to Mike, maybe to tease him about it. But then he's wondering why an unopened letter to Mike is sitting in Stan's parents' old things, forgotten. Is it from one of them? He can't imagine Rabbi Uris would have written to him, he hadn't liked him much. At all really. Stan's mother didn't seem to hate him, but she'd never seemed comfortable around him either. The writing was neat enough to be a woman's, but looking at it, he realised he knew exactly whose handwriting that was. And he was wearing glasses and going through a box nearby.

It's got something in it, something small and thick. He desperately wants to know what it is. And then he has a terrible idea. He's not unfamiliar with them, they make up most of his choices back home. But he's mostly the only one they affect, too. He's smart enough and sober enough to know that if he was doing the right thing, he'd show it to either Stan or Mike. He can't tell which he'd even tell first though – and fuck it, he's never claimed to be a saint, he wants to know what it is. What's inside it. Why it was never sent and languished here since at least 1996, give or take a few years. There's something painfully familiar about it all, just beyond his comprehension.

The letter is small enough to not bulk it out, thankfully.

Mike suggests that they all go on a walk, just to get out of the house for a bit.

He's familiar with the woods, but he hasn't been here in a while. Not a lot of non-weird reasons for an adult man to skulk around the forest by himself. It's not really near work or his home anyway.

They used to come here a lot, all together, in groups. It's definitely weird, being in the woods again with these people – but it's a good weird. A weird he's missed, with Richie bitching about getting fresh air and bickering with Eddie, and everyone talking.

They stop in a spot, and something feels weirdly familiar about it.

Ben looks around suddenly, a curious expression on his face. "Guys I think – I think I found the club -" he says, stamping a foot down and then suddenly disappearing through the leaves.

Everyone runs to look through the hole.

"The ground finally *did* swallow you whole, Ben!" Richie calls.

"Ben! Are you alright?" Bev asks nervously, giving Richie a light shove.

"Do you feel dizzy? Because that can be a symptom of concussion, and –" Eddie starts.

"Yes, Dr Kaspbrak, what's your expert opinion? Will he live? Will we have to amputate?" Richie cuts him off, putting on a dramatic voice.

"Shut *up*, Richie," Eddie snaps.

"I'm fine, the landing was soft," Ben calls up. "I think I found the old clubhouse."

Mike grins. "I can't believe it's still here."

Eddie objects to everyone climbing down into the clubhouse on an old wooden ladder that's been there, unmaintained, since the first

Bush administration, but of course they do it anyway. Because his friends might look like adults entering middle-age, but they are in fact, fucking children.

Stan is the only one who seems to resist going down, before being cajoled into it by everyone else.

“Really?” he asks, looking deeply unimpressed. “I’m happy for you guys to go down into the dark hole in the ground, but can’t I just stay up here?”

Everyone insists though, and he ends up rolling his eyes but Eddie knows it’s all over because he’s fighting off a grin.

What if the ladder breaks? What if someone pulls something – at the point they’re at in their lives, you can pull a muscle just turning your head too quickly. What if they have to call emergency services, and they have to say, oh just look through the forest until you find a big hole, and yes we are seven forty-year olds in that hole, just reliving some childhood nostalgia.

“Come on Eds,” Richie calls, going down the ladder. “Live a little. You could get eaten by a bear out there.”

“You know we don’t get bears this near the coast, fuckface, and also don’t call me that,” he hisses, but starts down the ladder anyway.

The old clubhouse is overgrown and dirty, but it’s still so familiar that it shocks him. *This* is the time machine – he remembers so many afternoons here, so many summer days just hanging out. It was their own secret little spot, one that was just theirs.

Ben had found the structure, and fixed it up for them. “In hindsight, we should have known you’d end up with your own construction empire,” Eddie says, looking around, and then at Ben.

“I’d hardly call it an empire,” Ben says modestly, but smiles, looking around at it.

Eddie looks down, and recognises something in the dirt. Against all better and usual judgement, he picks it up. It’s a little red ball. He smiles.

He turns to Stan. "Remember what this was from?"

Stan frowns. "I remember you batting it at my face until it broke."

"You broke it with your face!" Eddie protests, reviving a decades-old line of bullshit.

Stan glares at him. He looks over at a faded, holey piece of material strung up nearby, and smiles evilly.

"You remember that?" he asks.

The hammock. He feels a rush of affection, nostalgia and excitement as he remembers it. What is it about hammocks that is wildly exciting to you when you're a kid?

There was something about it when they were younger that made it the best seat in the house. They had set rules about how long they could each have in it, and of course Richie had to break those rules. Nothing set him off more, and he'd get in and try to annoy Richie out of it by any means possible, and on some occasions kicking his glasses askew with a foot.

"Yeah, I remember Richie was always breaking the group rules about it," he says, annoyed but still probably a little too fond.

Stan looks at him, eyes too knowing. He forgot Stan used to do that. "Well, all I remember is you guys spending a lot of time bickering in it. And canoodling."

Eddie opens his mouth indignantly. "Hey, it wasn't *canoodling*, I was trying to take my time and he wouldn't leave!"

"Right," Stan says, giving him an unconvinced look.

Eddie opens his mouth to argue – what else, he's not sure, but he feels like he should – and Richie chooses that moment to come stand next to them, grinning widely. "What are you nerds talking about now? Taxes? Death? Both?"

Stan rolls his eyes. "He's all yours, Eddie," he says, and walks away.

“Your worst nightmare,” Richie jokes. He’s in that big mood again.

Eddie sighs.

“God, you remember the fights we used to get into for that hammock, Eds?” Richie asks, and there’s something very fond fighting the edges of his bro-comedy voice.

“Yeah,” Eddie says, softer than intended. Richie catches his eye for a moment. “Because you *always* tried to take my time, fucknuts!”

Richie grins. This is more familiar ground. “Hey, rules of the jungle baby! And you got me back like a million times – I remember once you – “

Eddie works very hard not to smile. They’re older, obviously, but it’s unmistakeably them. And though he’s in an abandoned clubhouse hole in the ground and he’d rather fucking eat glass than let Richie know because he’d be unbearably obnoxious about it, he hasn’t felt so at home in a while.

Stan walks away from them, shaking his head. He probably shouldn’t have been teasing Eddie – it wasn’t fair. He’d forgotten about the hammock until now, how they used to fight over it. No one was as obsessed with the hammock as Richie and Eddie. They used to get curled up in it together, as much could be reasonably explained as friends trying to annoy each other by being in each other’s space.

He used to wish he could just tell them or something. But it wasn’t like that was exactly the problem, or at least, not the biggest one. Whether they knew or not, it wasn’t like they could’ve done much about it. No one was throwing any parades in Derry. It’s not like he could judge them, for fearing that anyway.

He spies a little tin box on the old table and it tugs a distant memory. He picks it up, brushes the dust off it, and remembers what it is the moment he opens it up.

“Your shower caps!” Bev says delightedly, coming over. He smiles at her.

“So we wouldn’t get spiders in our hair,” he says, remembering. “Which I’m still not *thrilled* about, right now, to be honest.”

“If I see a spider anywhere near you, it’s dead meat,” Bev replies, in that lovely way she always had – laughing, but not at you, not mocking.

He grins. “Appreciate it, Bev.”

“I’m also on hand to pick spiders out of your hair, if you need backup,” Mike says easily, coming up to them.

The clubhouse is pretty big, but Mike’s tall enough to almost reach the ceiling. Stan has to look up at him slightly. He smiles at Mike, too. “Well, then I’d say that’s that anxiety settled. One down...five thousand more to go,” he exaggerates, jokingly. It’s funny because it’s basically true.

Thankfully Mike and Bev don’t give him sad looks. “You’re telling me,” Bev agrees, and Mike makes an emphatic noise of agreement, and this makes them all laugh for a moment.

Bev looks down at the box of shower caps that Stan is holding.

“You remember the first time we put these on?” she says, twinklingly.

Stan grins. “Yes. Richie and Eddie couldn’t wait to take them off, and all I was trying to do was make things a little *less gross* for everyone.”

“You’d have thought Eddie would have been in your corner on this,” Bev agrees. “Maybe he was afraid of looking stupid.”

Stan nods. He looks to Mike. “Mike wasn’t. I think he was the first one to put it on.”

Bev looks at Mike, too, smiling. “I think we both pulled it off.”

Mike chuckles. “Well, I might have less of an issue with them, but I didn’t exactly want spiders in my hair either.” He smiles at Stan, and there’s something warm and nostalgic in his gaze, and Stan wishes for a fleeting moment that the old chair wasn’t broken so he could sit down. Then Mike looks at Bev, and Stan wonders what he was

thinking.

“Remember how you said you wanted to go to – where was it? Florida, right?” Bev is saying to Mike, like she’s rediscovered something well-loved packed away in storage.

Mike smiles with the wistful joy of looking at a childhood toy that you put away a long time ago. “Oh yeah...I forgot about that. Florida,” he repeats, and he smiles wider.

“Why Florida, again?” Bev asks.

Mike shrugs. “I don’t...I think I just heard about the beaches and the warmth and thought, that’s where I wanna go,” he says with a laugh. “Not that I really knew anything about it.”

Bev laughs. “I mean, I’ve been to Miami. That’s fun to do,” she says, and tips her head at him. “Did you ever get to go? Anywhere in Florida?”

Mike shakes his head, still smiling. “No, not – I guess I just... decided a while ago that Florida was a long a way to go for nothing specific. I took holidays closer.”

Bev looks at him, curious. “Would you go now? Or is it somewhere different now?”

Mike looks like he’s thinking about it. “Well, obviously there are more places on my bucket list than just Florida,” he says with a grin. They chuckle with him. “But I don’t know...I still kind of wanna see Miami, maybe,” he says, and grins, edging wistful again. “You know, if I was going to go down I’d bring someone with me. I’d like to make a road trip of it, or something.”

Something in his tone catches in Stan’s brain. He sounds fine, really, not bitter or anything. It just stirs up a memory. “I think I said once I’d come,” he finds himself saying, with a smile. “Maybe I can be your road trip buddy sometime. If you don’t get sick of me after being cooped up for hours in the same car. I’m deep into various different podcasts, just a heads up.”

Mike looks at him, surprised, and smiles so widely, so warmly, that

Stan almost feels dizzy. “I don’t think I could get sick of you. But if it’d make you feel better I could play my historical audiobooks, they’re *very* in-depth. That would make us even,” he counters, and Stan laughs. Mike laughs, and the thought occurs to Stan that he doesn’t know why Mike doesn’t have someone to bring already. He doesn’t know how it’s possible, really.

“Ok, deal,” Stan says, not looking away. Something that sounds like Richie and Eddie bickering loudly breaks the moment, and Stan looks away. This hole in the ground is too hot, he should get out of it soon. As he looks away, he sees Bev looking at Mike, who is looking at Eddie and Richie. She has a strange expression on her face, curious but almost more than that. He sees it for a moment before she calls something out to Richie, and Stan looks at Mike looking at them and feels strangely guilty.

The forest is calm, relatively untouched since Ben was in it last. It’s another thing that makes him feel like a kid again, but this time it’s good. It’s calming. Stan used to go bird watching in this forest, and he came along sometimes. Writing down fragments, drawing plans for things. Stan didn’t care as long as he wasn’t loud – which was perhaps why Richie was banned from coming.

He’s sitting against a tree, just above the entrance to the old clubhouse, pouring through the old notebook Bill found. Bill’s sitting against the tree opposite, going through a different, smaller notebook.

He’d had a jolt of adolescent fear when Bill had found the notebook he’d apparently left behind – thought he’d lost it, or maybe he’d abandoned it out of frustration a long time earlier – but he figured he probably wouldn’t have left anything too embarrassing just lying around in this place where they all went. Certainly not where Richie could find it, because he’d almost certainly read the poems in a variety of silly voices when everyone was around. Richie wouldn’t really mean it to be hurtful, but it would also have made Ben wish the ground would swallow him up. That’s why he’d rarely told others about his poems, only occasionally and only the ones that weren’t too sad or lovelorn. It was scary, giving that part of yourself away, even

to people who you knew you could trust.

Bill seemed to understand this – the book was a little withered and dirty from two decades in the neglected underground of the clubhouse, but Ben's name was legible on the inside cover – because he had asked if he could read it, once he realised what it was. He's an author, after all.

He'd agreed, because he wanted to look at the old sketchbook of Bill's he'd found. Poems still felt harder to show people than drawings, but there was still an element of trust there. Trust that you won't laugh, trust that you won't judge the things depicted most often.

So they were sitting, opposite from each other, going through them. Bill's sketchbook was also similarly damaged from its bad storage, but apart from the covers being bent and a few stained and insect-chewed pages it had preserved itself strangely well.

The book itself must have been from junior or senior year, because the drawings got progressively more advanced in technique and style. Bill had always had an eye for drawing, but this was the time that he'd really turned a corner with it, drawing all kinds of things: fantasy characters, nightmare creatures, or sometimes just studies of the rest of them.

"I forgot how good you were, man," Ben says, studying them.

Bill laughs, self-deprecating. "Yeah, f-for a sixteen year old trying to scribble daydreams onto p-paper." He grimaces, pauses to think about it, looks up. "I mean, nothing's changed b-but the medium I work with now," he says, with a grin. His stutter is better when he isn't drunk, Ben notices. It was uncontrollable when he was afraid. Or it used to be.

Ben chuckles. "Yeah, I guess. You wrote then, too, though." He looks across at Bill. "Why'd you choose writing? I remember you looking into art schools."

Bill shrugs. "I guess...I didn't t-think I could cut it as an artist. I didn't feel good enough," he says, and smiles ruefully. "Well, no, maybe I w-would've done it, but an English degree was an easier sell to my

dad. I think he w-wanted me to be a teacher, or something. At least I could p-pretend that I wasn't trying to do something creative, until I was out of school and trying to write my first novel. Kind of hard to keep it from him at that p-point," he says, and he smiles again but it's definitely more bitter.

Bill and his dad had always had a complicated relationship the whole time Ben had known him, and they'd dealt with Georgie's disappearance in opposite, conflicting ways. The only time he could really remember them getting along, having an easy relationship, was around the end of senior year – maybe because Bill was going off to do his sensible English degree at college, maybe because he thought that was Bill settled.

Bill chuckles, still bitter. Not harsh, just a thread of it there. "He should have had Mike as a son. Mike did the s-sensible thing. And he teaches." He pauses. "My dad loved Mike, actually. Felt bad f-for him. He was everything p-parents love: sensible, p-polite, hardworking, not sassy to adults."

"Not everyone's parents," Ben reminds him.

Bill nods solemnly. "Right, y-yeah," he says, and then bursts out a frustrated, "Fucking s-stutter! It's b-better at home, b-barely comes out."

He looks annoyed. "I think it's this town, it's fucking suh-suh-psychosom-matic!" he says angrily, and then he catches Ben's eye and they both start laughing.

Ben wonders if he went to a speech pathologist or just figured it out his own. He must have seen Bill once or twice here, during breaks, and he can't remember if it had gotten better. Honestly, after knowing him for a couple of months he'd sort of forgotten he even had it, it sort of faded into the background next to everything more exciting in his personality.

"Fuck," Bill says, wiping his eyes. He looks down at the poetry book, and back at Ben. "Come on then, how come you never p-pursued this? These are good, man. I say this as a p-professional writer, even though I d-don't write anything like this."

Ben shakes his head, feeling his cheeks warm. This is why he never showed them to people much – he couldn't handle rejection or mocking, and he's never been good at taking compliments. "I wasn't going to – they're just –"

"Scribbles?" Bill says, raising an eyebrow. "I'm not saying you didn't make the right choice with architecture; I mean, you own your own firm now, which is *insane*," he says, with a grin. Ben smiles. "But, I guess I just think you could've done it."

Ben laughs, surprised. "I could be an unemployed, middle-aged poet, right now," he says, and Bill laughs. "No, I guess – I didn't think I could ever show them to people. Some of them were a bit...personal. I didn't want people to laugh. It's harder to laugh at floor plans. Although with some people I've worked for, not impossible."

Bill laughs but gives him a funny look, and for a moment he's deeply reminded of Stan. It's funny how they started to pick up each other's characteristics a bit. He wonders how much he's unconsciously picked up from them, what parts of them he shows to other people without realising it.

"You know I get that, right?" Bill asks. "You think I always felt like my work was genius? I write weird horror shit, I'm still convinced that everyone's just tolerating it, and some day – well, actually, I've had my fair share of reviewers saying, well this is the one where he's lost it, if he ever had it."

Ben shakes his head. "No, man, that's gotta be the minority! People are obsessed with your stuff, and they're not wrong to be. My assistant Devi is always reading your books, she can't get enough of them," he says, smiling. "Not to mention, me. I don't get a lot of time to read, because I'm usually working but I've got yours. *The Attic Room* was just unputdownable. I read it on a long-haul flight, because I don't sleep much on planes."

Bill smiles, a bit self-conscious, but grateful. "Thanks, man. Except for the ending, right?"

He looks at Bill, confused, and Bill shakes his head. "It's not – I won't put you on the spot. Just something someone said to me a few days

ago. Well, a lot of someones over the years.”

Ben is glad he didn’t ask him about it. He’s a great author, he writes really memorable characters and terrifying scenarios, but his endings don’t often live up to what he’s built up. “Aren’t you involved with the movie? You said they didn’t need you right now, right?”

Bill grimaces. “Yeah. The movie. B-bane of my existence.”

Ben breathes out. “Shit. That bad?”

Bill chuckles, but he suddenly seems very tired. “No, no it’s not *b-bad*. We’ve got a great director, and the cast is great, m-my wife...” He trails off, and picks up again. “I m-mean, I’m hoping I’m doing a good job adapting it, I’m not even a s-screenwriter, I’m not s-sure why I thought this would be a good idea.”

“I’m sure it’s better than you think,” Ben says, more to be comforting than really knowing that’s true.

Bill laughs, ruefully. “I don’t know.”

He shakes his head and looks at Ben sidelong. “Actually, you wanna know what’s so b-bad about it?”

Ben nods, curious now. “What?”

Bill lies back against the tree trunk and takes a breath, looking up at the canopy. “I don’t have an ending. I mean, I do, b-but I know that people hate the b-book one. I don’t know how anyone w-wants me to end it.” He laughs, wheezily. “Fuck.”

Ben takes a moment, then ends up saying what’s on his mind anyway. He tries to say it nicely though. “I, uh, don’t really know much about film production, but isn’t yours being made like, now? Don’t you need a finished script?”

Bill shrugs. “Not totally,” he says, in an exhausted way. “Especially w-with adaptations. You just need to have enough to convince p-people you know w-what you’re doing.” He laughs bitterly.

Ben sighs. “I see.”

Bill looks at him. “Why do you think that p-people don’t like m-my endings? What didn’t you like?”

Ben hedges. “I wouldn’t say that – I mean I didn’t – “

Bill gives him an unimpressed look. “C’mon man, I’m not going to hold it against you p-personally. I just trust you to b-be honest without b-being a dick ,” he says.

Ben grins a little. “That being why you’re not asking Richie?”

Bill grins, and nods. “He wants it too much.”

Ben chuckles. “Alright – I think it’s that you have such good set-ups, and such *genuinely* great characters. Adelaide is so fully realised, and she’s not cliché, and you wrote her with more sensitivity than a lot of writers would for a female character.”

Bill nods, listening intently. “I started writing her when I was f-first dating Audra. I don’t want to be *t-that guy* but having her in my life made me b-better at...writing women, I guess. Not that I t-think I was – t-terrible – before, but – I would t-talk about Adelaide, and Audra would challenge me, give me t-things to consider.”

“Sounds like she was good for you,” Ben smiles, can’t help feeling a little jealous. High school never really leaves, does it? Here he is, jealous of Bill again. In goddamn Derry. He’s not exactly jealous of him and Audra, because he knows very little about her, just that she’s pretty, she’s been in things for the last few years and she’s somewhat of a household name. It’s more like – the intimacy of that, sharing your work with someone, someone who makes you better – he could go on dates, he could probably find someone to marry pretty easily, but you can’t just *buy* or *set-up* a relationship like that. And anything else wouldn’t really be worth it.

“Yeah,” Bill says quietly, looking down at the notebook. He sounds somewhat unconvinced. Ben really would like to ask more, but he decides against it. He gets back on track.

“So...you’ve got so much good stuff going on – I guess sometimes, from a total lay person’s point-of-view –“ Ben prevaricates, before Bill

shoots him a look. "Ok, ok, you just pull shit out of left field sometimes! And I think you could write an ending that Adelaide's character deserves," Ben says defensively, and wonders if he was too harsh.

Bill looks at him, surprised. "Well, t-tell me how you really feel, Ben."

"You asked –" Ben starts protesting, then notices Bill is grinning.

He sighs and shakes his head. "Not cool, Bill."

Bill chuckles. "No, I'm s-sorry. I genuinely appreciate t-the help, I'll t-take every bit I can get right now," he says, and looks down, and then up. "I knew I could t-trust you with it, you know? You were always a good friend, Ben, and I – I m-missed you, after we fell out of contact. It's – really good to see you looking so well." He says it in the same genuine way he always used to, and Ben feels a sudden flash of guilt, like he used to have when Bill was particularly kind to him back in the day. *Sorry. Sorry I'm pathetically and unshiftable in love with your girlfriend. Even though I didn't mean to be. Even though we all became friends at the same time, and she was friends with both of us before she became Your Girlfriend, and she's still my friend now but it's not the same.*

It's ridiculous, because it's been decades and none of them are dating each other anymore, and he's not exactly planning to make any kind of move on Bev. Who is married.

He smiles at Bill. "Thanks, Bill. I really missed you too, actually," he realises. Not that he'd cared less about Bill, but he'd never really thought about if he missed him. He'd been busy enough not to have to think about that, mostly – with one obvious exception.

Bill chuckles. "Glad t-to hear it," he says, jokingly.

Ben looks at him. "No, seriously. You were a really good friend to me, then. Whenever that old psycho Orlovsky was being sadistic, whenever Bowers' gang was on the warpath, even...goddamn Gretta Keene. You were there for me...meant a lot."

Bill smiles genuinely, a little sadly. "I wish you hadn't had t-to deal

with t-that shit, t-though. Wish none of us had.”

“No, it wasn’t...fair.” Ben nods heavily, feeling a surge of affection for him. He turns a page and instantly feels that childish guilt, stomach twisting. It’s a page of studies of Bev – her hair like a lit match, a mix of warm watercolour shades from yellow-gold to red. He looks at them for a moment, and then turns the page quickly. The next page has a big stain disfiguring whatever used to be beneath it, and it doesn’t seem to be from the forest dirt or rainwater seepage. A memory is poking through.

“What happened here again? I feel like I almost remember?” Ben asks, passing it over to Bill.

He looks surprised, then grimaces with the memory. “Oh right, this. S-speaking of Gretta...I think it was like, tenth grade? I think s-she knocked a can of Diet Coke onto it, when s-she s-saw what I was drawing. *Accidentally*, you know.”

Ben breathes out. “Man, she was a real dick, wasn’t she?”

Bill laughs, surprised. “She really *was*, Ben. I h-hope she’s miserable. She’d actually deserve it.”

Ben remembers earlier that day suddenly. “Actually, I saw her this morning – at the Shop-N-Save with Bev. She pounced on us while we were shopping.”

“No!” Bill gasps. He smiles wickedly. “W-what’s she like now?”

Ben allows himself a smirk at the memory. “Let’s just say...time has not been kind.”

Bill laughs heartily. “W-well that’s the best n-news I’ve heard since I got back to this shitheel town,” he says, with great schadenfreude. He smirks at Ben, quirked an eyebrow. “Did she recognise you?”

Ben grins more, and shakes his head. “Not one bit,” he says, and pauses, remembering the moment. “*And* I’m pretty sure she tried to hit on me.”

Bill makes a disgusted face but laughs, sounding both horrified and

impressed. “*That’s gotta b-be kind of victorious.*”

Ben shrugs. “I don’t know, it was kind of weird,” he says, and thinks about it. “It was pretty great to be like, hey, remember when you said I’d die a fat virgin? And just – the look on her face, God. *That* was satisfying.”

Bill laughs incredulously. “You didn’t! *Amazing*, Ben.” He suddenly looks a little wistful, again. “*Fuck*. I forgot she said t-that. Goddamn *bitch*,” he says, and he sounds so angry for a moment.

“You made it better, though. Remember?” Ben says, suddenly feeling another wave of affection and stale guilt.

Bill looks at him, with the same genuine empathy but a little surprise. “Yeah, I...I remember now,”

He should have been paying attention to where he was going, then he might have seen her first. Most boys would be embarrassed to admit that they would double back to avoid a mean girl, but Ben was not most boys. The thing was, he should’ve been able to deal with anything a bully could throw at him now – being around real terror, real danger, the threat of really actually possibly dying in the cold and dirty darkness of the sewers, violently, at the hands of a serial killer – that should mean that he doesn’t even sweat what some kids say about him. Maybe he’s stronger now, but it still gets to him. He’s still afraid of them. It’s easier when he’s around his friends, but they can’t be with him everywhere, all the time.

He was busy looking for something in his bag, listening to his headphones, walking around the side of the school, holding his notebook in one hand. He feels someone tug his headphones off harshly, and his stomach sinks. Richie does it sometimes, but it’s not aggressive, he’s just boisterous.

Gretta Keene steps into his line of sight, flanked by two of her bitchy friends, Kristy and Jenna.

His music is too loud and it’s still playing out of his earphones.

“Watcha listening to, Winnie?” Gretta asks, falsely nice with an ironic giggle in her voice.

He tries not to react immediately. She’s recently decided his new nickname

is Winnie, because in her words, he's "fat, eats a lot, and has very little brain". He hates her only slightly less than the psychotic, hate-filled redneck teen that teamed up with a serial killer and tried to murder him and his friends two years earlier.

"Don't you have something better to do?" he asks, attempting to seem unfazed.

She smirks. "Oh but I love hanging out with you, Winnie. You always have the coolest music," she replies, and her friends titter. "What is that?"

Of course this is when the chorus kicks in and he scolds himself for listening to it so loud.

"Aw, baby don't hurt me, no more!" Kristy says, pouting at him as Gretta and Jenna screech with laughter. Jenna has a laugh like a seagull and it sounds ridiculous.

"You wanna know what love is Ben?" Gretta says, ramping up, eyes glittering maliciously under thick smudgy eyeliner. Ben wants to leave but somehow he can't. He's frozen. "Well, it's sort of like how you feel about cake, except that it's something normal people feel for each other."

The girls screech with laughter, wiping their eyes and doubling over with mirth. Ben's not sure if he believes in God – his parents aren't strictly religious, but he's also had interesting conversations with Stan about it many times – but he would sign pretty much anything away to any higher power if he can just make it through this interaction without showing them how much they're getting to him. Or crying. God, please let him not to cry in front of them.

Gretta smirks cruelly. "No, actually I get it. This song is so fun," she says, laughing meanly. She pouts. "Do you think about her when you listen to it? Your tragically obvious crush with the orangutan hair."

He tries to turn, suddenly unfreezing, but they block his path. He finds the stop button finally, and his headphones go mercifully quiet.

"Aw, did we upset you, Winnie?" Jenna asks, pouting. "Isn't she dating your friend, anyway? He's a lot better looking than you, even with the s-s-

s-stutter,” she says, doing a cruel impression of Bill. He feels a flush of righteous anger.

“Aw babe,” Kristy adds, sniggering. “You know she doesn’t go for chubsters anyway, right?”

Gretta cackles, her face a mask of malicious glee, and smirks at Kristy, and then back at him. “I mean, she’s definitely a skank, but even she’s gotta have standards. Well, some,” she says, tittering through the sentence before cracking up with all of them.

“She’s never going to touch your twinkie, Winnie,” Jenna stage-whispers, like she’s telling him a secret. The girls scream with laughter, like this is the first joke they’ve ever heard.

His face burns with rage and humiliation. He has to get out of here. He hears himself say it before he even realises he’s really doing it. “Go to hell, Gretta! One day you won’t be able to hide how empty and fucking pathetic you are!”

The smiles slip just for a moment. Gretta’s eyes narrow dangerously, then she laughs. “Aw, Winnie’s on the defense, pow!” She looks him right in the eyes, smirking. “At least I’m not going to die a lonely, fat virgin, Hanscom. Now, that, would be pathetic,” she says, voice absolutely drenched in venom and her harpies explode with laughter.

He doesn’t even think, he just pushes past them. His vision blurs as he runs, trying to find somewhere quiet and alone. He doesn’t want to be around any of the other kids. He doesn’t even know who he wants to be around right now. Maybe he should just go home – but Mom will be home. What’s she going to say? The thought of trying to recount what Gretta had said, to her, makes him feel a hot wave of shame and nausea in his stomach.

Not looking where he’s going, again, he bumps into someone as he’s coming around the back entrance of the school. There isn’t anyone else around, but he feels a jolt of fear, and wonders if this day can get worse.

Stepping back, he realises it’s Bill – which is both better, in that he’s a friend, and way, way worse, in that he’s maybe the last one of his friends he wants to see right now, except maybe Bev.

“Ben – “ Bill says, and his expression instantly becomes concerned. “Are y-you ok? Wh-what happened?”

Ben doesn't meet his eyes, because hasn't he been humiliated enough today? “I'm fine –“ he starts.

“Y-you're not ok, Ben, I'm w-worried about y-you!” Bill cuts him off, almost annoyed. Not at him, he realises a moment later. “W-who did this?” he says, and suddenly looks so worried than Ben feels the last of his resolve crumble, and he starts crying. Bill responds in a way that might be alien to other teenage boys, but isn't to their little band of trauma-bonded weirdos, and pulls him into a hug.

Bill's hugs are really good. He lets Ben cry into his shoulder, and then, after Ben's past it, he lets him go.

“Y-you don't have to t-tell me, but wh-what...” Bill asks, very gently, trailing off. He looks sympathetic and sad, and there's a glint of the righteous anger he sometimes gets in his eye.

Ben tells him, though he has a moment where he thinks he won't be able to get the words she said out. It's not like he goes to pieces publicly over being called fat, it's pretty much background noise at this point, and Richie constantly makes fun of his taste in music (albeit never really in a cruel way), so that's not what it was.

“F-fucking Gretta,” Bill says fiercely. “How f-fucking dare she t-talk to you like t-that.”

Ben shakes his head. “Or about you and Bev...why does she hate Bev so much? What did Bev ever do to her?”

Bill looks angrier now, but thankfully doesn't run off after Gretta. That never ends well. “She's j-jealous. Fucking j-jealous.”

Ben nods, and looks down.

“Y-you know she's f-full of shit, right, B-ben?” Bill says, softer.

“I know,” he says, very small.

“L-look at me,” Bill says, in that strangely commanding way he has

sometimes . Ben does. Bill smiles a little, kindly, and puts his hands on Ben's shoulders. "You're gonna l-leave this shitty t-town and its dickheads b-behind soon enough. And t-then you'll meet cool p-people who like p-poetry and b-building and p-pop music – " Bill starts, and this surprises a small laugh out of Ben. Bill grins. "And t-they're gonna love you. Like we love you."

Ben smiles, cheered, but the thought is a little bittersweet. "As long as I still have you guys," he says, wiping his eyes.

"Oh, always, B-ben. Always," Bill says, beaming. He lets Ben go and looks around. "You w-wanna get outta here? I'm sick of school today. Wh-wherever you wanna go, w-we'll go. I've been m-meaning to p-pick up my new books at the library, anyway. Or w-we can get milkshakes? Or b-both? Anything you w-want."

Ben smiles, feeling actually happy. "Library first, milkshakes second? Mrs Johnson will kill us if she sees us bring drinks in."

Bill grins. "Sounds good."

Ben is suddenly extremely grateful that this is the friend he'd run into. He cares so much about the people he declares as his family, and Ben is still incredibly grateful to be a part of that. It'd be easier, maybe, if he was the Duckie to Bev's Andie and Bill's Blaine, at least less painful. Life is not as simple as a John Hughes movie , unfortunately, because Bill isn't some snotty rich kid and he fully understands why Bev loves him. Ben loves him too, although not in the same way. He loves them all though, he can't help it. It's more like if Duckie and Blaine were also best friends, and Duckie never told her how he felt out of respect for both of them. Out of fear for the loss of what they already have, the three of them. But, that would probably be a pretty depressing teen movie.

"And look at you! You d-did exactly w-what I said you'd do, right?" Bill says, smiling in a reminiscence.

Ben chuckles, slightly awkward. He *had* met cool people in college but he also hadn't gotten a girlfriend until he was nineteen. "Yeah, you were right. Whole other world outside of here."

Bill chuckles too. "Yep."

Bill's phone goes, and he pulls it out of his pocket. He looks conflicted, and his finger hovers over it, like he's going to answer it. Then he turns it face down on the top of the notebook.

Ben doesn't ask, but Bill sees his expression anyway. "I – M-my wife. Audra. I'll call her b-back," he says, sounding slightly guilty.

Ben nods, trying not to look judgemental. It's honestly none of his business what problems Bill is having with his marriage, but it kind of makes him sad. From what he's heard, Stan might have had the healthiest one and even that seems to be over.

He hopes Bev's is happy. Yet somehow, he can't quite convince himself it is. But he's never been objective where she's concerned.

Bill looks at him, somewhat oddly. "You dating anyone now?"

Ben shakes his head. "Work is – I put in a lot of hours, because the company needs the work done. Easier without disappointing someone."

Bill nods, contemplatively. "You've got t-that right, Ben," he says, decidedly a little bitter. Ben wants to ask him about it, but decides against it.

Mike drives through town, to pick up some last-minute things for dinner. Bill's agreed to cook, if he gets help. Disbelief had been expressed in his ability to cook, and he'd informed them that he cooked more often than Audra did, on account of being home more often.

He knows these streets inside out, because he knows this town almost inside out. It's one of the benefits (or maybe not) of living here so long. It's like he knew it so well his memories became sort of dormant, buried under all of the boring day-to-day memories and things he has to remember. But everyone being back has reawakened memories attached to these streets, these buildings, things he thought he'd forgotten, things he'd buried.

There used to be a record store on the corner here, where Richie

would spend hours looking through their records and cassettes. He and Bev used to go with him sometimes, and laugh about the cover art of different records. He'd give Richie a lift home after, and they'd listen to whatever new cassette he'd bought, and sing along if they knew the song. Bev and Richie would squeeze in the front seat, and sometimes Richie would stick his head out the window, like an excited dog.

The library always makes him think of Ben, and Bill. He's always reminded of Eddie when he goes past the pharmacy, and the place where the comic book store used to be. Eddie and Richie, who was in there a lot with him, getting new comics, trading old ones with Eddie. Eddie had bought Mike his first comic – *Xmen*, he remembers, because even though he didn't know any of the characters and storylines, he'd gotten sucked into one because he felt for how even though they regularly seemed to be saving the world and helping people, those people still kind of feared them.

He taps his fingers on the steering wheel as he waits at the lights. He's playing Hozier, because it was already in the player, but it's such a relaxing album he doesn't mind.

As Hozier sings about rolling eyes and tired sighs and innocence dying screaming, he gets a shiver and his gaze falls on the synagogue. He doesn't mean to think of it, because usually he doesn't. But then he never usually pays much attention to the building anyway. Maybe it's the song.

"Honey, you're familiar, like my mirror years ago..." Hozier sings gently, as Mike reminisces.

Mike doesn't really go to parties a lot, but this one is fun. They've been going to more things like this recently though, maybe because junior year has been different.

The new coach of the football team – a younger guy, that they got in after they finally fired Orlovsky – saw him playing an informal game of baseball with his friends, and begged him to join the school's terrible team. Which he had been going to turn down, because between school and the farm he didn't have time, but Ernie had been thrilled about it and had lightened his workload just to allow him to do it. They'd seemed so proud.

So he joined, even though he'd never really got along with some of these jock kids. They weren't all bad, but some of them had been terrible to him – but apparently if you could win for them, they had convenient amnesia about ever hating you.

Bev had also been going through some kind of strangely similar thing. Before, every girl had seemed to think like Gretta, and Bev hadn't been interested in befriending any of them. I have friends already, she'd say.

But then Eddie had started dating pretty, somewhat popular Carrie Jennings, and Bev had become friendly with her in school. Suddenly she became friendly with Carrie's friends, who hated Gretta and her friends – they seemed to look at her in awe, like she was cool and grown up, maybe because she smoked, maybe because of the nasty rumours that Gretta used to spread, maybe because she had a boyfriend. And they were popular kids, or friends with the popular kids, and Carrie had convinced her to try out for cheer.

They'd sat up one night at home, in Bev's room, before they'd accepted the idea of trying out for their various extracurriculars. They both knew that it was several different types of crazy, and yet they couldn't stop turning it over in their minds.

"Pro: it would be good for your college application," Bev said, looking at him.

He shook his head, smiling tiredly. "Moot point. Unlikely I'm going. But you could put it on yours?"

Bev frowned. "Nope, I'm with you. Un-fucking-likely."

Mike frowned too, and gave her an understanding look. "Maybe...you could get a scholarship?"

Bev snorted a laugh. "Yep, with my stellar grades."

Mike wanted to say something more, but she shook her head. "Anyway, not the point. Find a pro."

He thought. "Exercise?"

She laughed again. "Weak sauce, Mikey."

He grinned. "Sorry."

"Con: this might be a long-form way to humiliate us, and pull a Carrie on us at a social event," Bev continued darkly.

Mike nodded. "The girl asking you to try out is called Carrie, even, so." He sighed. "Con: why do we want to go into the belly of the beast that mocked us for years, even if they're not planning to Carrie us?"

Bev sighed. "I know. Why forgive them? Smart move would be to not, right?"

"Right. Richie would be happier with it."

Bev raised her eyebrows. "He might be being obnoxious but he's not wrong, either."

Richie had not been a fan of the idea, calling it a betrayal of everything they stood for. Everyone else had been less bothered, but Eddie had tried to warn him about CTE and injuries that professional footballers got.

"True," Mike said slowly. He looked at her. "Pro: this might be an opportunity to see what life outside of our bubble looks like. You know I love the bubble. But it makes us intense sometimes, and cuts us off from people. We're gonna need to know how to do this in like, less than two years."

Bev nodded, slowly, and sighed. She lay back against the wall next to her bed. "I just –" she started. "I want not to trust this. I want to be smarter than this. I want the seven of us to be enough," she continued, and then in a softer voice. "But I – God, I want to be more than just the lucky seven sometimes." She looked at him, sadly, and he looked back. "I love you guys, so much. But it would be nice to – not be defined by what happened to us. I want to believe that's what this is. Isn't that pathetic?" she asked, very small.

He took her hand and squeezed it. "Nope. Same thing." They bowed their foreheads together. With anyone else, this might be weird, but from almost the day he met her he'd felt like she was the sister he was missing. Or the one he never got to have.

"Everyone's excited for me to do this. You should've seen Ernie and Miriam's faces when I told them."

Bev looked at him. "But are you excited for it?"

He nodded, and smiled. "I think so. Have we decided?"

She smiled. "Think so. Promise to bring me a towel if I end up drenched in pigs blood?"

He grinned. "Absolutely, and I expect the same of you."

He and Bev weren't interested in going to parties if they couldn't invite all their friends, but their new athletic ones seemed to have a more-the-merrier-approach to party sizes, and didn't seem to care.

The party is in full swing, and it's late on a Saturday night, which means any moment there could be sirens and running, but for now Mike is having a good time. He's managed to rope Stan, Ben and Richie into dancing – figuring it would stop Richie annoying Eddie, who was off talking with Carrie and a friend of hers, and get Stan and Ben out of their tendency to isolate themselves from the party. Bev and Bill are somewhere else – the last place he saw them was outside, smoking, but who knows.

"Everybody jump!" one of his teammates drunkenly yell-sings along. Everybody jumps. Everybody is a bit drunk.

"Why are we jumping?" Ben asks, laughing.

"Because that's what we've been commanded," Richie replies, like this is obvious.

"You gotta obey the song, man," Mike says, laughing too. "Right, Stan?"

Stan rolls his eyes, but can't hide his grin. "This song is dumb. We're dumb."

Richie gasps. "Don't disrespect us or House of Pain like that, Staniel!"

Mike catches Stan's eye, and grins. Stan grins back, his particular, can-

you-believe-Richie smirk. He has different smiles – when he’s retorting to something Richie’s said, when Bev gets him to put his book down, when they’re all watching a movie and something startles a laugh out of him, the one he gets when he’s birdwatching and he sees something he hasn’t before. That’s maybe his favourite one, because it usually only comes out when there aren’t a lot of people around, and it seems like the purest distillation of his joy.

Mike doesn’t say this any of this, though, because he’s aware that it’s probably a bit weird to be cataloguing your friend’s different smiles. It’s not like he’s planning to do anything with the knowledge. He just wants to know how to bring them out.

“Are all these songs about jumping?” Stan asks long-sufferingly. “I swear this is the same song.”

Ben shrugs.

“You’re a fucking heathen, Stan my man! How have you been taking piano lessons this long and you still can’t differentiate music!” Richie says dramatically, over the music.

“I’ll differentiate between songs I like, Richie – whoa –” Stan says, and for a moment looks like he’s going to fall. Mike moves forward automatically, but he steadies himself.

Now that he thinks about it, Stan does look kind of dizzy.

“You good? Need to barf? As long as you don’t get me, I say go anywhere, my man,” Richie says, jokily but there’s an alertness in his eyes that wasn’t there before.

Stan holds up a hand and then flips him off.

“He’s fine, then,” Richie says, grinning.

“Are you ok?” Mike asks him, and he looks unfocused. Stan looks back at Mike.

“Yeah – just a bit, a bit dizzy,” he says.

“Let’s get some air then,” Mike says kindly, and Stan smiles gratefully. It’s

another one that he likes.

Richie and Ben offer to come, but he knows a song they like has just started playing. He tells them it's fine, and Stan says not to make a fuss. He still puts an arm around him to hold him steady while they go outside.

It is good to feel the air on his face. He didn't realise how drunk he felt until he was outside.

Stan leans back against the side of the house, and closes his eyes.

"I didn't think you'd drunk so much," Mike says. "I didn't think I had."

Stan groans. "No, I didn't either." He opens his eyes, and looks at Mike, next to him. "I'm fine, really. I'm just a bit woozy."

"Do you want to go home?" Mike asks, kindly.

"Yeah, I think so," Stan says.

"I'll take you," Mike says, and Stan grins.

"You're drunk too! You can't drive!" he says, incredulous.

Mike grins. "I'll walk with you, and then I'll sober up and come back here. Or Bill can drive Bev and I back. She knows where the keys are hidden anyway."

Stan looks at him deeply for a moment, and Mike wonders what he's thinking. He's always wondering that. "Can you tell them bye from me, when you get back?" he asks.

Mike nods. "I can."

Stan smiles slowly. "Thanks, Mike."

They're only supposed to be walking back to Stan's house. His mom will be asleep, but he has a way of sneaking in.

They walk past the synagogue, when Stan stops and stares at it.

Mike stops. "What is it?"

Stan looks at him. "Can I show you something?"

Mike looks at the synagogue and back. "Now? Isn't it locked?"

Stan grins, loose and drunk. "Yeah, but I know where he hides the key."

"What if he's there?" Mike says. He doesn't like the idea of running into Rabbi Uris while they're both drunk. He thinks little enough of Mike when he's polite and sober.

Stan shakes his head. "One, it's really late. And two, he's out of town anyway. It won't take long. Come on, Mikey," he says, warmly, tugging on his arm.

Mike doesn't think this is a good idea. But Stan is never this open – he's a good friend in other ways, he's not loud, he has a great sense of humour and a greater sense of anger on your behalf. But he's not often loose like this. Worry-free. Stan smiles, and it's this unusual, easy warmth. Mike is weak, and he's too drunk not to say yes to that.

The synagogue looks pretty much how he'd expected inside. It's much like the Baptist church in town that he's been into once or twice. He looks around though, and has a jolt of, oh, this is a part of my friend's life. This is a big part of his life, and I'm just now really seeing it.

It's not like it's any kind of problem, but it feels strange. He looks over at the podium. "Is that where your infamous Bar Mitzvah took place?" he says, with a slow smile.

It's dark, but Mike can tell Stan's reddening. Stan laughs anyway. "That is where I declared myself a fucking loser in front of the whole synagogue, yes. Still living that down. Three years later."

Mike laughs. "Well I'm sure you inspired any younger Jewish children in attendance."

Stan laughs, lightly. "Yes, at least they think I'm a hero."

"So what are we looking for?" Mike asks, and Stan looks at him, cocks his head to one side a bit. Birdlike behaviour. Learned trait, maybe. Mike

loves to see it.

He holds a hand out, something almost uncertain about it. "Come with me," he says, and Mike lets himself be led. He follows Stan upstairs, and onto the balcony overlooking the room. He doesn't drop Stan's hand. Stan doesn't let go.

"This is my favourite part," Stan says, half-whispering. "I used to like watching the people at services from here. When I was small enough that I could see them, but they couldn't see me. It was like – being close to God." He looks almost sad. He crouches low next to the bannister, and Mike crouches with him.

Mike wonders why he wanted him to see this, right now, but at the same time there's something very bubbly in his chest about being shown something so personal. He knows Stan had cared more about it once, or maybe believed it better before. Hard to go what through they did and stay the same.

"I wanted to stop coming here after he broke in, when he wanted to scare me," Stan says, and his voice shakes a little. Mike remembers well, and shudders. He squeezes Stan's hand.

"I'm so sorry," is all he can say, but he wishes he could say, I wish I could have protected you from that. I'd protect you from anything if you'd let me.

Stan looks at him oddly again, a deep, long look. "When I came back, I came up here. It made me feel safe, and invisible, you know? If I stayed here, at this level, I could watch but I could be hidden. Safe," he says, eyes wide. It's like he's trying to say something, like he's trying to hint at something, but Mike's brain is soggy with drunkenness.

Mike doesn't know what to say, but he doesn't look away.

"Mike," Stan whispers, and it's unbearably pained. His eyes flit away, down, back, up. Flighty. Learned behaviour. "It's like – it's like that with you. Safe," he says, and if Mike wasn't right in front of him he wouldn't be able to hear him at all. They're very close. Mike's brain is buzzing. His skin is buzzing.

"Oh," Mike says, softly, and smiles. Stan's worried wide eyes suddenly look much more at ease, and he smiles. Mike suddenly realises which one this is. It's that rare one, the almost-unobserved one, when he's seen a bird he doesn't have. The pure joy of him.

"I –" he starts, and doesn't finish, because Stan moves forward and presses a kiss to his lips. It's not long, but it's nice. It's neither's first kiss. It still might be Mike's favourite, because of the way his lips tingle when they break apart a moment later.

He looks at Stan. Stan looks wide-eyed and wild, skittish. Some of his curls have fallen into his face. Mike smiles at him, and he feels full of light. He holds a hand out – tentatively, Stan's always told him, with birdwatching it's important to show you're not a threat to what you're looking for. He brushes a curl behind Stan's ear and leaves his hand there. Stan smiles slowly, nuzzling into the touch.

Then suddenly, they hear voices. Stan pulls back, finger to his lips, barely breathing. Mike is silent, trying to process what's changed. They're hidden behind the bannister, and it's dark, but they look out at the room through the slats in the bannister and they can't see anything. Stan squints, having not brought his glasses to the party.

But Mike knows they both recognise the voice. Or one of them.

Mike sees Rabbi Uris, walking into the synagogue with a brunette woman. Younger than him. Certainly not Andrea Uris.

Mike wants to say something – this isn't what it looks like, but he's frozen. Stan looks confused. "That's – she does work for him. Here," he says, in the barest, most breathless whisper. He takes Mike's hand again, anxiously, without tearing his eyes away.

They don't hear him anyway. They don't even look up. They're laughing. Mike's never heard the Rabbi laugh. He didn't think it was possible.

He kisses her, and she kisses him back and Mike can't pretend it isn't what it looks like anymore. Stan grips his hand tightly, and his whole body freezes up. He curls up behind the banister, turning away as quietly as possible. He holds onto Mike's hand.

After what is either three hours or ten minutes, the Rabbi seems to get whatever he'd come to his office for, and he and the woman leave. They stay hidden for a lot longer.

When they finally get outside, Stan is shaking. Whether it's anger or shock, Mike doesn't know. He won't quite make eye contact with Mike, and Mike's heart sinks. It had to be that. It had to happen tonight. He's seen this look in Stan before, he can only take so much at a time. This is too much. That made it too much.

"Stan," he says, quietly but meaningfully. "Look at me."

Stan looks at him, finally, still kind of flighty and wild-eyed. What Mike wouldn't give to mirror Stan's earlier action, just now, to comfort him. "Yeah?" he says, and his voice is higher than it even is normally.

He wants to put his hand out, to steady him, to comfort him. But he thinks better of it. "What do you need?" he says, sympathetically. "I promise I'll understand anything," he says, and smiles a little. A little is all he can manage. "I won't be mad at you. Just be honest."

Stan is breathing heavily. His eyes flick to the synagogue and back. He looks pained. He takes Mike's hand, and presses a kiss to his knuckles. It's dark, and late, but Mike feels a strange thrill of both fear and excitement. "I need – I need this to stay here. In the safe place. I just –" he breaks off desperately, looking so anxious and sick, that Mike worries he's going to start crying, so he just nods understandingly. He looks at Stan.

"It's ok. We can leave it there. We're still friends, ok?" he says, as warmly as possible. Stan blinks, then throws his arms around him.

He buries his face in Mike's shoulder for a moment, and then says, in a cracked, quiet voice, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"It's ok," Mike assures him. "It'll all be ok."

The lights turn green, and Mike shakes himself and drives toward the supermarket, feeling frazzled nonetheless.

Mike had come back with the few things he'd agreed to pick up from

the shops seeming a bit spacey. Bev had asked him if he was ok, and he'd waved her concerns off, saying he was just tired. She'd told him to relax, she'd help Bill with dinner instead of him.

Bev lets herself into the kitchen, where Bill is prepping vegetables.

"You need a sous-chef?" she asks.

He smiles, like he's surprised, but nods. "Love one, if you can b-bear doing another meal today."

She waves a hand dismissively. "I asked you, it's fine."

He chuckles and moves aside to let her work beside him. "Can you chop those carrots?" he asks, and passes her the chopping board.

She nods, and gets to work.

"It's weird, being in this kitchen so much today. I was never in here as a kid, y'know?" she says to him, bemusedly.

Bill nods, grinning. "If I remember correctly, S-Stan's mom was weird around you. B-both you and Mike, really, but I feel like she was always k-keeping an eye on you."

Bev giggles, pouring the chopped carrots into a bowl. "She wasn't mean, y'know, like other people used to be. Like Mrs K. She just seemed a bit uncomfortable with having me around. And I think when she realised that I only had eyes for you, and didn't have any designs on her son she was a lot less stressed, and she didn't seem to mind us hanging out."

Bill chuckles. "Yeah, she w-wasn't so bad. You know, I knew her f-for almost as f-far back as I can remember – our parents were f-friends, because they lived close to us. That's how I met Stan," he says, and grins, a little wistfully. "He was so small, and so *quiet*, and it was weird, b-but he never made fun of my stutter, so I thought he must be a good f-friend."

Bev watches his face as he says this, smiling. She's remembering how she used to like to piece together their friendships before it was the seven of them, during the time when she vaguely knew the four of

them but only from a distance. When she used to wonder how four boys who were so different had ended up friends. They were her best friends, but they'd met at thirteen. She didn't know what it was like to have friendships from that young. She liked to hear their stories.

"I'm glad you did. You were right," she agrees.

He nods. "I was. Can't imagine the club w-without him," he says, and the grater he's using slips out of his hands and falls over on the counter.

She instinctively reaches over to comfort him. He looks at her gratefully, quiet. They stay like that for a moment, then he blinks and looks away. "Damn onions," he says, with an attempt at humour.

He is definitely working on the onions, but she knows that's not the only reason he's welling up.

She doesn't comment on it, and they work on the meal in companionable silence for a few minutes.

"It was...f-funny seeing that old photo from P-Prom before, huh?" he says, a little too casually.

"Oh yeah?" she asks, nonchalant.

"Just –" he stirs the onion into the sauce he's making on the stovetop. "Brings back some memories."

She grins. That's an understatement. "Good, I hope."

"Definitely good," he says, with a grin in his voice.

"It was a good night," she says, reminiscing. "Close to the perfect John Hughes movie moment as you can get, I'd say."

He looks over at her. "I w-wanted it to be."

"It was," she says, with a nostalgic smile. "Remember –"

"Yes," he answers, not even having to ask. She laughs.

“Remember how we climbed on that b-bit of roof outside your window, and watched the sunrise?” he asks, and it’s definitely a bit wistful.

She keeps chopping. “Yeah, that was...” she says, and wonders what to say about it. It was very emotional, or she remembers it that way. At the time, they were content and happy, snuggled together under the duvet they’d snuck out onto the roof. But they were both very aware – that she had her scholarship to NYU, and he’d be going out to Northwestern in Chicago. Barring one of them winning the lottery and being able to afford the two-hour flight regularly, they knew it was unlikely they’d be able to see each other much with such a long drive, and trying to keep the relationship going might be near impossible. So they’d just snuggled up together and watched the sunrise.

“One of my b-best memories, actually,” Bill says, and she watches his shoulders as he stirs. He doesn’t look round at her this time, focusing on the food.

“Mine too,” she says. “I was so grateful Miriam and Ernie trusted us enough to have the run of the house that night.”

Bill chuckles, and his shoulders relax. “Yeah, I’ll say. Would have b-been awkward if they were there,” he says, and Bev laughs. “M-Mike was very nice to stay away, too. Where did he end up? Ben’s p-place?”

Bev stops chopping vegetables to think. “I don’t remember, actually. He helped Stan take Richie home, and I think Ben went with them. Maybe he did crash with Ben? I don’t know.”

Bill nods, over the sauce. She goes over to add the last lot of vegetables, and he stirs them. After a moment, he tastes it with a spoon. He smiles blissfully, and dips a clean teaspoon in and holds it out to her. “Taste this, it’s good,”

She sighs, but takes the spoon. “I forgot you used to do that, when we cooked together,” she says, but can’t help smiling at the memory.

“Then y-you remember I make great sauces,” Bill returns, grinning.

“Your mother made good sauces, and if it weren’t for her you’d know nothing,” she laughs.

He laughs, indignant. “Isn’t that all c-cooking? C’mon, try the sauce!”

“Alright, jeez,” she says, and tastes it. It reminds her of being sixteen, in the Denborough family kitchen, cooking a big meal for their friends, her and Bill working in tandem. It tastes like comfort and rain on kitchen windows and U2’s *One* on the radio. She opens her eyes. “God, I forgot how good this is,” and Bill smirks.

“Didn’t I tell you?” he says, and she smiles, feeling suddenly like she has to mess with him for that.

“It’s *great*, but you’re too afraid of salt,” she says, picking up the shaker.

He gives her a warning look. “D-don’t even try it, Marsh,”

She grins. “It’s great, it just needs sharpening –“ she says, trying to get the shaker over the pan. Bill runs defence, trying to grab the shaker off her, laughing. He doesn’t try to grab her arms, though, and she can’t tell him how grateful she is. She’s laughing, too, and then – almost at the exact same time – they remember that they’re very close, a little tangled up, and no longer sixteen year olds who are together.

Before they can say anything, the kitchen door opens, and they both turn. Bill is smiling a touch guiltily, and she supposes she is too. They weren’t really doing anything, but they’re old enough to admit that it wasn’t nothing either, especially to the casual observer.

Who happens to be Ben. He looks at them awkwardly for a moment, and attempts a casual expression. Bev feels a flash of guilt and can’t explain why. It’s not like it’s Tom that’s walked through the door. If it had been Tom, it would have been a hell of a lot worse than an awkward look. She got worse if he thought a waiter was flirting with her.

Ben is pretty much the opposite of what Tom is, as a person. It makes her heart hurt a bit.

“Uh, sorry to, uh, interrupt,” he says, lightly, but his eyes flick between them. “Mike just wanted me to ask when you think we’ll be serving up?”

“Not a p-problem, Ben,” Bill says, a touch too quickly and cheerily. “I’d, uh, say about ten?”

Ben nods. “Ok, good. Smells good,” he says, with a strange smile. A little strained. Why does just looking at him make her feel guilty right now? It’s not like they ever – is it just embarrassment? Embarrassment that one of their friends saw her messing around with Bill? Bill who is married, but for less than half the time she’s been. Maybe that’s it, but she’s somehow uneasily aware that she probably wouldn’t feel this way if Richie had come through the door, and not Ben.

For some reason, she calls out to Ben as he starts to leave. She doesn’t even know what to say, so she asks the first thing that comes to mind. “Did Mike crash at yours on prom night? I realised I don’t even know what you guys got up to after you left with Stan and Richie.”

Bill looks at her, surprised. Ben looks a little confused too, but answers, thinking. “Uh, it wasn’t that wild, from I remember. They dropped me off first, and then they continued on to take Richie back to Stan’s ‘cause he was basically passed out on our laps. I think I fell asleep reading,” he says, with a sheepish smile. “I should probably go tell the others dinner is soon,” he says, and does actually leave this time.

Bill raises an eyebrow at her. “All this talk of p-prom got you in a detective mood?”

She shakes her head, smiling. “I don’t know. Nostalgic, maybe.”

He smiles at her, and she remembers how much she loved his smile. A bit goofy at times, maybe, but full of warmth. A long time ago she used to wonder why he was the leader, why his three friends looked at him like sunflowers towards the sun, this skinny kid with his stutter – but then he’d smiled at her once and she’d realised how it felt to be in it.

She smiles back. He looks like he's going to say something, and then his phone goes.

He pulls it out, presumably to silence it, but she can't help recognising the contact photo, or the name on the screen. *Audra Riley Denbrough*, although he's only got her first name there. The little she sees of the photo is the two of them, her leaning on his shoulder smiling.

Bill definitely looks a little guilty now. "Uh, we're about to eat. I'll call her b-back."

Bev nods. She's not sure what to say to that. It's not up to her whether he calls his wife back. She also can't judge him for having a dysfunctional relationship, although she doesn't think – she *hopes* – that his isn't anywhere near as bad or for the same reasons as hers.

"So, should you get back to the sauce before it burns? That would be a *tragedy*," she asks, and he swears and turns back to the sauce. It's not burnt, yet.

Dinner is comfortable, again settling into a routine none of them expected to fall back into.

Everyone seems to be hanging around, talking. Someone's put on music, but it's the unobtrusive kind that people their age listen to at dinner parties. Which rules out Richie.

Stan kind of wishes they'd stay. Soon enough everyone will go back to the guesthouse and he'll be here. By himself. In this house, with all of its silence and secrets.

He's not being a part of it, right now, just watching the others talk from the doorway to the kitchen as he waits for the kettle to boil.

It goes off, and he turns toward the counter and goes to pour the hot water into his drink. When he turns back, Bill's come up to the kitchen doorway. He's smiling a little, but his eyes are concerned.

Part of him, a defensive part, wants to say *I can be alone, you know*.

I'm not constantly thinking about doing it again if you leave me on my own for two seconds. But another part of him, a bigger part, is just thinking how glad he is to see him. Bill's eyes have always shown great emotion, bad and good, and he's never been good at hiding it.

"Look, I'll understand if you just n-needed a break from all of us," Bill starts, with a slow smile. They had some wine with dinner, but it's nowhere near as messy-drunk as last night ended up being. Not that it was bad, though. "But you were kind of qu-quiet at dinner. D-did you hate the sauce?" he asks, and it's not the question he really means – his eyes make that obvious – but Stan appreciates it nonetheless.

He smiles a little. "The sauce was great. Dinner was great. You and Bev did a really good job together, actually."

Bill looks down, face a little red – either from the wine or something else – and smiles. "Yeah, I – guess we work well t-together."

Stan's not imagining it then, there is something going on there. They're high-school exes, though, there's bound to be some residual feelings. Given his own –

He steeps the tea, trying to get out of that mental cul-de-sac. He looks at Bill. "You want some tea?"

Bill nods. "Milk, one s-sugar, if y-you have any?"

Stan nods, and gets the little sugar container down from the shelf. He makes Bill's tea quickly, and neither of them says anything for a moment.

Bill takes the tea, and speaks up. "Something's on your m-mind, though?"

Stan looks at his tea, pours a little milk into it. "You won't like it."

"Stan, I can h-handle it," Bill says, concerned.

Stan looks at him. He has that look on his face, the convincing look. The one that said, *abandon all the instincts that have served you well thus far in life, and come with me into this sewer, or this old crackhouse,*

and put yourself in mortal danger, because I'm here and I won't let anything happen to you. It's a very unfair look for a person to have.

He swallows. "I found something, when I was going through Dad's study before dinner. It was about – what happened. That summer."

Bill stiffens, but he nods. "Can I – s-see it?"

Stan nods, grimly. They take their mugs and head out of the kitchen towards the study.

It's weird being in his father's study as an adult. He was never allowed in here as a child, it was his father's private room. He knew not to go in, for fear of the consequences. His father wasn't prone to wild rages, and only hit him once, when he was a lot younger. He actually apologised, which was rare. But there was something about his cold anger and disappointment that almost hurt more than a physical hit. Stan used to not try and provoke it, when he was younger. It got harder as he got older. He stopped caring whether he did. He feels like he's breaking the rules even now, being in here, even though he's forty years old and his father isn't here to scold him. He can't shake the feeling he's going through his father's secrets, one by one. He already knows the worst one – but what if it isn't? What if there's another one?

He goes over to the desk. There's a small box there, with a lot of papers in it. He picks one up and hands it to Bill.

"I think...I think he was keeping articles about it. Everything related to what happened in 1989," he says, and finds his voice is shaking a little. Just from thinking about it. He hates it.

Bill looks anxious, too, at least. He reads the article on top, face going ashen. He hands it back to Stan, and Stan has a look over it again. He's already read it, but he can't help but reread.

Derry Post, 19th September 1989

**SERIAL KIDNAPPER AND KILLER CAUGHT, KILLED IN DERRY,
THANKS TO SEVEN SURVIVING CHILDREN**

Jeff Wainwright, Senior Crime Reporter

A sick, child-kidnapping menace that has stalked Derry's streets for a year, maybe more, has finally been stopped thanks to the actions of two kidnapped children – and their five friends, who went into belly of the beast to save them. This was clearly an extremely dangerous and foolhardy course of action, but in this reporter's opinion, one less monster on the streets is one less worry for your own children.

Robert 'Bob' Wayne Gray, whose age is still unknown but is estimated to have been around 40-50 years, is believed to have worked as a carnival clown previously, although there were no sightings reported of a clown walking around Derry proper. Reports from the site suggest he was living in the old sewer tunnels underneath a rundown house on Neibolt St, and that he stalked and kidnapped various children while dressed as a clown. According to the Derry Medical Examiner, he stood at nearly seven feet tall and had a bulky frame.

He is now considered to be solely responsible for the disappearances and assumed deaths of several town children over the last year, including Betty Ripsom, 13; Edward Corcoran, 13; George Denbrough, 7; and Patrick Hockstetter, 15, the latter of whom went missing only a month earlier. Another child, Henry Bowers, 15, has been apprehended and is believed to have been working with Gray. Police are reportedly looking into whether he can be charged as an adult due to the severity and gruesome nature of the crimes committed while working with Gray, including the murder of his father, Derry Police Officer Oscar Bowers.

He looks up and Bill's eyes are watery, looking at another article from the box. "Wh-why did he k-keep t-t-this stuff?" he stutters out, worse than usual, and winces.

"I honestly...I don't know," Stan says, shakily, because he really doesn't. "He never," he starts, and his voice catches and he has to take a sip of his tea. "He didn't ever want to talk about this with me. He asked me if I was alright, when it happened, and he said that I needed my faith more than ever. He said...God would be the answer, and then he never talked about it again. And all that time he was... keeping these?"

He's shaking, now, actually shaking with anger or fear, or both. Bill gives him an empathetic look, and reaches over to put a hand on his shoulder. It is calming. It reminds him of the police station, the long wait, the way Bill had done that exact thing when he was cold and in shock and shaking.

"Thanks," he says quietly, a little embarrassed.

"I'm a-always here f-f-for you," he says, with deep feeling, and winces. "Sorry," he says.

Stan looks at him. "Don't be. It – it reminds me of you. Before."

Bill smiles, eyes still a little haunted-looking, but his smile is genuine and warm and grateful. Stan remembers again why they followed him anywhere.

Bill looks down at the clippings. One is a picture of them leaving the station that a reporter took. Stan had hated it, after everything they'd been through, and then there's someone shoving a camera in their faces? He doesn't look happy in the photo, but none of them do, really.

"M-maybe he was m-more scared than you thought?" he muses. "Y-your Dad was like m-mine. They w-weren't great at emotions. He couldn't talk about G-g-g-" Bill's voice breaks and he doesn't finish the sentence. Stan knows what he wasn't going to say. He returns the favour by putting his arm around Bill's shoulders.

Bill looks grateful. "I just m-mean...it could have b-been his w-way of understanding. Wh-what happened t-to us."

Stan thinks on it for a moment, and something hot and upset bubbles up out of him.

"I'm so – why didn't he just talk to me? He made me feel like I had to pretend like it never happened, and that I was fine, and that I didn't wake up screaming in the middle of the night sometimes thinking I was still in the sewer!" He says, and he'd started in a normal, if bitter tone, but had gathered volume and as anger he'd gone on.

Bill squeezes his shoulder, giving him a bitterly understanding look.

“D-dads, huh? T-that was their solution t-to everything. Your d-dad... loved you, t-though. My d-dad...shut off, and it was n-never t-the same after...” he looks down. His tea is barely touched. “It w-was like he didn’t w-want to l-love either of us, after it. It’s w-why my p-parents broke up,” he says, with bite. “The happiest he ever w-was sending m-me off to college. Out of s-sight, out of m-mind. Like he did w-with G-g-georgie -” he says, and starts to cry.

Stan’s already got a hand on Bill’s back, so it’s easy to pull him into a hug. “I’m sure he does, in his own stunted, old-fashioned way,” he says quietly, as Bill cries into his shoulder. “But I’m so sorry he made you feel like he didn’t. Because – God, Bill you’re so loved. So much.”

Bill hugs him tightly, and Stan is again reminded of that worst day of his life, at thirteen. They’d comforted each other like this then. He was glad that they hadn’t forgotten how to do it.

“I m-miss him, still, y-you know?” Bill says, voice heavy with tears and old grief. Stan knows he’s not talking about his Dad. “I th-thought I’d g-g-get over it one d-d-day, m-maybe, b-but –“ his words are mangled by the stutter and tears, but Stan still understands.

Stan just holds him, and he can feel that he’s crying too. Not that it takes much to set him off these days. There had been a solid period in his adulthood where he barely ever cried, and ever – since he – he’s been thinking a lot about things, and crying very easily.

“Small and maybe obvious therapy tip: you were never going to get over it. Something like that leaves a scar. He was your brother, and he was a sweet, kind kid who didn’t deserve to be in this shitty town, and he didn’t deserve what happened, and I’m so, so sorry that you’re still hurting,” he says, shakily, and he’s definitely crying now.

Bill straightens up, looking at him, red-eyed. “It’s n-not your f-fault. It’s almost the opposite, Stan. Y-you came in with m-me, even though you were t-terrified. Y-you did t-that for me, and y-you did t-that for him, and I w-will never stop b-being grateful for t-that.”

“Thanks Bill, although you remember how well that worked out for me,” he says, attempting dry humour when his throat is choked and

his words are coming out wetly.

Bill makes a strange, aborted gesture, like he wants reach up and touch Stan's face but has thought better of it. Stan doesn't know whether to be glad or disappointed. Maybe he's a bit of both. He's not sure he could cope with that, but some childhood part of him would be thrilled. Well, he's thinking childhood but the fact that he's even thinking about this points to it being more than just a distant, nostalgic memory of feeling.

"If I d-didn't know how you got those little w-white scars I d-don't think I'd even n-notice them. They're so small n-now, they're b-barely there," Bill says, looking at him, but at the side of his face, kind of entranced. The bruises have long-since faded, but even remembering Bob Gray's dirty, sharp fingernails digging into the sides of his face makes him want to throw up or take a shower or start drinking. He tries not to dwell on it.

Stan instinctively looks down at his arms, still bandaged under his long sleeves, then up again quickly. Bill can't see the bandages, but he follows Stan's eyes down and up, and looks suddenly very sad again. "I don't w-want to make t-this uncomf-fortable, so I'll j-just say it once m-more, b-but," he starts, like it's an effort, and he takes a breath. "I'm so glad you're alive, Stan," he says, and he doesn't stutter once.

Stan could cry. And he does, but he's happy about it.

Notes for the Chapter:

I did make a reference to Carrie, and yes, I have decided that Stephen King's works exist in this AU with one exception, whichever that could be.

As always, love to hear your thoughts! Or hmu @pantsaretherealheroes on tumblr :)

5. It Was Never Quite Like This Before (Not One Of You Is The Same)

Notes for the Chapter:

and it's back, it took me a very long time to get this out because it is the longest chapter yet and I'm willfully verbose!

if you're keeping up with this, you probably already know what you're in for but just in case here is a trigger warning for some references in this chapter to

- physical abuse/domestic violence
- self-harm
- suicidal thought patterns/attempted suicide (that one is a given, but still)

big huge thanks to my brilliant beta @manycoloureddays who took on this monster while being busy with other things, literally what would i do without her <333

“You’re telling me you don’t watch Bojack Horseman?” Richie asks, incredulously.

Eddie glares at him. “I don’t have a lot of time for TV, ok? Also, isn’t that show a cartoon? Like, for kids?”

Richie makes a dismissive noise. “Eddie, it’s something you should *make time for*. And no, it’s pretty much like any drama about a depressed middle-aged man except it’s genuinely gutting, and the characters are a mix of animated people and talking-animals.”

Eddie shakes his head, like he’s speechless. There’s a crease around his eyes that tells Richie he’s enjoying himself, though. Richie grins.

“Ok, if I promise to watch an episode sometime, will you stop going on about it? Jesus *fuck*,” Eddie relents.

“I think you’ll like it,” Richie says, grinning.

Eddie nods, with a tired smile. “I really don’t get that much time to watch things, though. Myra – sometimes I watch things with her. She knows the shows, though. I’m not a huge fan of what she watches, so then I don’t sometimes, and then I just end up doing stuff for work. I don’t think she’d like this though.”

Richie’s mood sours thinking of them curled up watching TV together. It’s so...*married*.

“What are you like, watching Grey’s Anatomy together? The Bachelor?” Richie needles. Eddie’s sour expression tells him he’s gotten a direct hit.

“Aw, are you invested, Eds? Do you watch the other ones too? The Bachelorette? Bachelor in Paradise?” he teases.

“Fuck off, Richie, I told you I barely watch TV anyway,” he says, glaring. He pauses. “I watched your Netflix special though, actually.”

Richie tries not to react, even though inside his brain there’s probably a red light flashing and a klaxon blaring and all the little people in his brain control room are running around in panic, like a certain Pixar film he *didn’t* watch on Netflix one night expecting to turn it off ten minutes in and ended up staying the whole time and crying about his childhood. Obviously.

Does he want Eddie to have liked it? To have hated it? Should it even matter to him? Why should he take an insurance analyst in a neat polo’s opinion on comedy?

“I didn’t like it,” Eddie says, matter-of-factly.

Richie laughs. “Fuck you very much, Eds,” he says, and can’t tell if he’s annoyed or thrilled at this. “Other than your whole life currently, what do you know about comedy?”

Eddie scowls. “Fuck you, man. Look, I never said you weren’t funny. You’ve always been funny, even though you’ve always been the most annoying motherfucker too.”

Richie raises an eyebrow and grins. “You know it. I’m so glad you’ve finally accepted the love between me and your mother.”

Eddie makes a gesture like he’s itching to put his fingers around Richie’s throat, and shakes his head. “That’s your problem. You’re still telling jokes like you’re thirteen. And it’s a fucking waste, you idiot, because you actually know how to tell a joke, even when you’re delivering hack material.”

“Well, I didn’t realise we had Johnny Carson in the house, giving me the benefit of his comedy experience,” he snarks, but his stupid brain is now just shouting *FUNNY HE THINKS YOU’RE FUNNY HE THINKS YOU KNOW HOW TO TELL A JOKE HE THINKS YOU’RE FUNNY*. Which is fucking stupid, because he’s attempting to have some kind of plausible deniability to himself about whether his stupid childhood crush has returned in full force, and thoughts like that are kind of wrecking it.

Eddie scowls. “Whatever. Keep telling crappy jokes about jerking off to your girlfriend’s friend’s Facebook. What do I care?”

Richie can’t help grinning. “Oh but you *do* care, Spaghetti. I can see it in your cute little red cheeks,” he says, and leans over to attempt to pinch his cheek like a least favourite aunt. They’ve had wine with dinner, and now he’s onto beer while Eddie’s nursing another glass of red. It’s not enough for him to be drunk by any means, but he’s pleasantly buzzed.

“Fuck *off*, Richie,” Eddie says tiredly, attempting to swat his hand away. The wine has made his reflexes slower, and he doesn’t get there in time before Richie touches his cheek.

In that second, Richie realises he’s miscalculated horrifically. This is just him touching Eddie’s cheek right now, he needs to pinch it, he needs to play it up like when they were kids, or it’s just him touching Eddie’s cheek and *lingering*.

Eddie’s eyes widen for a moment, and Richie roughly pinches Eddie’s cheek and Eddie pulls away.

“You’re so annoying,” Eddie says, but his voice sounds funny. Maybe

Richie's imagining it.

"You love it," Richie contends, smiling beatifically.

Eddie shakes his head. "Y'know, the last person to do that to me other than you was probably Carrie's aunt. Which was weird, because she wasn't my aunt, but she used to do it to Carrie as well."

"Kinky," Richie says, putting on a weird voice and grinning lasciviously.

"Gross," Eddie says, frowning.

"I didn't know you met like, her extended family," Richie says, thinking about it.

Eddie gives him a look like this is obvious. "We dated for like, pretty much two years, Richie. It's a small town. How would I not have?"

Richie lies back against the couch. Mike and Ben are engaged in a conversation, standing on the other side of the living room, and Richie glances at them and then back up at the ceiling. "You were *so boring* to be around when you were dating. It was all *oh hope I'm not late for my girlfriend and can't talk I've got to call my girlfriend and stop trying put raspberry jelly on my face Richie I've got a date with my girlfriend.*"

Eddie's face works, like he wants to be very, very annoyed but he also wants to smile. "Fucking hell, Richie, I can't believe you're still getting on my back about this. You had *way* more girlfriends than I did in high school. You just didn't like 'being tied down'," he says, making air quotes. Richie doesn't want to be charmed by this but he is. Eddie ticks them off on his fingers, tipsy. He was always more of a lightweight than Richie.

"There was Carol Rudetsky, Debbie Johnson, Margo Macaluso – one of Carrie's cheerleader friends, who I made the mistake of introducing you to –" Eddie says, giving him a scolding look. Richie cackles.

"That German girl – Klara – for like two seconds at the start of senior year, and...I *know* there's one I'm missing..." Eddie says, brow

furrowed in thought. It's definitely bad that he thinks that's charming.

"Heather Reid," he supplies, because he's a masochist at heart, and reminiscing about the various failed relationships he's had and women he's disappointed over the years is one of his favourite past-times. Not that he could really call any of those high-school flings *relationships*, because they barely were – he'd work really hard to get them, get them, realise he didn't want them or that if things got more serious they'd figure it out eventually, and then either annoy them into dumping him or dump them himself.

Heather was slightly different. She was the last one, at the point in senior when he'd stopped trying to pretend to do the whole dance (while loudly proclaiming he just hated being someone's *boyfriend* it was so *stifling*, and Eddie would be annoyed, and Stan would roll his eyes, and Bill would just smile because of course being a *boyfriend* suited him very well, even when he and Bev argued more and more that year, because they still loved each other a lot). Heather was the only one he didn't feel that guilty about.

Heather's pretty, he thinks. And she's not one of the popular crowd, and she likes actual cool music. They're making out on her bed and she has the radio on an alternative station. It's playing Sonic Youth, and Heather loves them. They'd split a joint earlier – another thing he likes about her is that she smokes with him and doesn't judge him for wanting to get stoned. What the fuck else is there to do in this shithouse town?

Kim Gordon is asking him to tell her that he's burning for her. He supposes it's a sexy song. Maybe it would be sexy with someone else. That's not fair. He likes Heather. She's smart, and funny too, and he likes her small, full-lipped mouth. Maybe that's enough.

"Oh shit, I just realised something," he says, pulling apart from her.

"What?" she says, looking worried. Her face is a little flushed.

"Bull in the heather? Is that why you like them?" he asks, grinning stupidly.

She rolls her eyes and falls back on the bed, laughing. "You're such a dork, Richie. God."

"Is that why you like me?" Richie asks, and he's joking but he's not, because he's never not craving validation.

She grins at him. "Unfortunately for me, yes."

He smiles, satisfied, and leans in to kiss her again.

Kissing is nice, he likes that. It's a perfectly serviceable way to spend an afternoon with a girl you like. If that was all it was, that would be great. But there's always a moment where you cross from making out to Oh, Are We Doing This?

He's holding onto her hip until he isn't, and suddenly his hand has shifted onto her butt. Heather looks at him, surprised and almost – anxious, or maybe something else.

She takes a breath, and says quietly, "My parents won't be, uh, back till tonight..."

She's looking at him like he has to fill in the next part of the story. So he says what he thinks his line should be. "Um, uh, cool...does that mean you want to –"

It comes out reedy and awkward, but her eyes widen, and she nods. "Yeah, I mean, if you want to –"

"Uh, of course I want to, are you kidding?" he says, with fake bravado, because a voice in his brain is starting up again. Cards on the table, Tozier. Time to put your money where your mouth is. This is what you want, right, you never shut up about it. And he'd really like to shut that voice up for once.

There's a moment where neither of them says anything. Then she pulls him down to kiss her, but it's somehow more awkward than before. Before was kind of easy in a pleasantly stoned way, but now there's a weird pressure on it.

She pulls back for a moment. "Do you have, uh, a condom?"

For a moment he considers saying he doesn't have one, but then he'd have to admit certain things and in this moment he is determined to lose his virginity to Heather, who is sweet and pretty and likes Reservoir Dogs and

old cheesy sci-fi movies.

He finds it in his wallet, and puts it on the nightstand. Somehow the idea of just putting it on now is too horrifying to contemplate, and she doesn't ask him to do it yet either.

They start kissing again, and she pulls his open button-down overshirt off, and then his t-shirt, and he feels uncomfortably exposed, but he pushes through. It's fine. This is what everyone feels like their first time.

She's breathing heavily, as he pulls her t-shirt off. She actually looks kind of panicked. He stops. "Are you ok?" he asks, concerned. "We don't have to do this, you know. If you're not ready," he says, like he's doing her the favour. She does look anxious, though.

"No, I'm – I'm fine – I want this. Just nerves," she says, and her voice is too high, but she kisses him before he can make another decision.

Her bra is black, and unadorned. He supposes he should try to get a feel in, because that's what he's always done if he's ever gotten this far. She has nice boobs, from what he can see of them. They're a nice small size, which is good, maybe? Or maybe he's supposed to want a girl with bigger ones, like Jenny Herbert, but that just seems like a hassle.

She squeaks, just slightly, when he moves his hand onto her bra, and he automatically pulls back. "Keep going," she says, moving his hand back, but it doesn't feel like a sexy kind of 'keep going', and he's fooled around enough to know what that sounds like.

He shoves that thought away. It's fine. They're both fine, and this is going to happen, right now. This afternoon.

After a while, he supposes he should be moving his hand down south. This is inching ever more quickly towards completely foreign territory, but he's nothing if not good at bluffing. Or bullshitting.

It happens that as he's very, very slowly moving his hand under her skirt, asking 'Is this ok?' and she's nodding, and trying to kiss him, that the radio ticks over to a song he's heard maybe once before on this station and doesn't know the name of.

"Girl," the singer croons, and a dramatic guitar riff follows. "You'll be a

woman, soon,”

He freezes, and before he has time to do much more, Heather pulls away. “No, no, I can’t, I can’t, I’m sorry,” she says, sounding freaked out. She turns away from him, and curls up, and he can hear that she’s crying.

“Hey, hey, Heather, it’s ok, can you look at me?” he asks, now feeling both guilty and worried. “I’m sorry, did I do something – I’m not actually maybe as familiar with this stuff as I may have made out, and if I hurt you accidentally, I’m really sorry, please look at me –“

He puts a tentative arm on her back, and she turns around, and she looks small and sad and tear-stained. “I’m so sorry – I’m so embarrassed, I just wanted to –“ she bursts into fresh tears, and Richie thanks God that having at least one female friend has taught him, through experience, what to do when a girl is crying.

He just holds her on the bed and she cries into his bare chest, and it doesn’t feel like a sexual thing, even though both of them are shirtless. Though it’s probably hard to have a sexy experience if someone’s crying.

“Hey, hey,” he says soothingly, and he thinks he’s doing pretty well at this for an idiot whose usual response to bad feelings and crying is to make dumb jokes. “It’s alright, I’m not mad. I’m not expecting anything of you.”

“Thanks, Rich,” she says into his chest. She turns to look at him. “I’ve just – I’ve never done this before, and I don’t feel ready, but I thought – maybe, I could be ready, for you, because you wanted to do it. I’m sorry,” she says again.

He blows a raspberry. “You’ve gotta stop apologising. I’ll get a swelled head and start thinking I never do anything wrong, and then my friends will have to kill you,”

She laughs wetly.

He looks up at the ceiling. “You know, I wasn’t that wild about doing it today,” he admits, tentatively, wondering why he’s doing it. “But I just – I thought we both wanted to, so why not?”

She laughs a little more. “God, we’re dumb. Can we just – at least with shit like this – just be honest with each other?”

He smiles, and he feels a little sad, but also oddly happy. Ironically, this has all made him feel closer to her. "Yep. And you know, we don't have to do anything unless you genuinely, actually want to. Ever. I'm not about forcing people to do things, unless it's watching bad movies with my friends," he says, and she laughs.

"Thanks, Richie. You work very hard to conceal it, but you're actually a pretty decent human being," she says, sounding cheered. "I like your friends."

"Me too. At least most of the time," he says, and he's comfortable enough holding her that he doesn't even mind being shirtless.

Eddie looks sleepy, because he is apparently a middle-aged soccer mom who gets sleepy after two glasses of wine. He lies back on the couch and looks at Richie.

"Aren't you supposed to be on tour right now? What did you tell them?" he asks, looking curiously at Richie.

"I absolutely already told you this, so you might want to check for Alzheimer's," Richie starts, and Eddie frowns. "But I told them, unavoidable family emergency, and that I had to go back to my hometown for a few days."

Eddie smiles, and it's easy in a way he hasn't seen in a long time. "You *are* a big softie, God. Even though you're desperate to pretend you're not."

"Lies and slander. Maybe I was just sick of tour dates and I needed a convenient excuse to get out of it," Richie attempts but he doesn't put much oomph into it.

"Well, now I know you're more full of shit than usual," Eddie says with a chuckle. "Because I know you love us, because you called us your family, and that's why you cancelled or moved some tour dates to come back here and see us."

Richie chuckles. "I love Stan, strange Jewish birdman that he is. I came back for him. The rest of you I could take or leave," he says, but he can't help the surge of affection he's feeling. Maybe he is

drunker than he thought. That would be embarrassing.

Eddie laughs. “Fuck you, Richie.”

There’s a moment of silence between them, which is rare, but it’s easy. “I know you’re about to say something fucking dumb and ruin the moment, Richie, but before you do I wanted to say,” Eddie says, not looking at him, eyes almost closed. “I know we all left work and things to be here, but you and Bill might have some real shit to sort out when you get back. Especially you, with these tour dates. I think it means a lot to – Stan, that you’re here.”

Richie doesn’t know what to say. It almost seemed like Eddie was going to say *to me* at the end. But that’s probably just wishful thinking. “Well...I guess I’m grateful that Stan’s here. Nothing else they throw at me matters,” he says, quietly.

Eddie opens his eyes and looks at him strangely for a moment. “Actually, I think I need you to say something fucking dumb now, I can’t deal with you being emotionally mature.”

Richie grins, going for the first thing that pops into his head. “Uh... boobs. Cindy Crawford’s boobs. But Cindy Crawford’s don’t compare to your mom’s, which I have seen, and I would compare to the Sistine Chapel in terms of cosmic artistry –“

“Ok, that’s dumb enough, you can stop now,” Eddie says, wincing. There’s some kind of warm look in his eye though, and Richie is sure he’s not imagining it this time. The happy crease around his eyes is still there.

“You asked.”

“My mistake.”

Richie looks up at the ceiling, grinning.

“So you’ll be back at school by Monday, then?” Ben asks Mike.

They’re having the kind of adult-work conversation that Richie would

hate, but Ben finds very interesting. There was a point, when he wasn't sure whether he'd even be able to be an architect, when he thought maybe it wasn't even the right fit for him, when he considered switching his major to education. Teaching had always seemed like something he could do, something that the high school guidance counsellor had marked out for him on aptitude tests. He'd been told he had the temperament for it. But then things had turned a corner with architecture, he'd started doing really well, and then he hadn't thought about it more than that.

Mike frowns, slightly. "I'm not sure. I did say that I'd probably be taking the Monday off to help Stan, and I've got a sub who can cover me, but now everyone's here I'm not sure he needs me," he says, and his eyes flick towards the door to the hallway and back in a split-second. "To help with the boxes, and the packing," he continues.

Whatever that's about, Ben doesn't press him for it. "I'm sure he wants as much help as you can afford to give," he says instead. "Many hands and all that, right?"

Mike smiles, and there's still something a little sad about it. "Yep. Sooner we're done, the sooner he can sell it, I guess."

"You think he'd want to sell it?" Ben asks, surprised.

"Well, I don't know why he'd want to stay here," Mike replies. "And he's probably not keeping both houses. He doesn't need the stress."

Ben nods, considering.

Mike looks around. "I should probably get onto that washing up. Bill and Bev cooked, and Stan's not doing a washup while I'm here."

"Do you need someone to help? You shouldn't have to do it all yourself. That's a lot of washing up." Ben offers, but Mike smiles and shakes his head.

"That's really generous, but I'm fine," he says.

Ben looks at him. "You sure? I'm happy to."

Mike smiles, and there's a lot of warmth in it, and still something

cloudy and sad in his eyes. Ben wonders, not for the first time, why he didn't leave. That had always been their plan, to get old enough and get the hell out. He doesn't ask, though. It wouldn't be fair. "Yeah man, don't worry about it. I need a moment to think anyway."

Ben looks at him. "Are you ok?"

Mike chuckles. "I just find washing up calming. I know, it's weird, but don't worry too much about my mental health just yet. I'm ok."

He smiles, and nods towards the front door. "I think she's out there, if you wanted to talk to her."

The great thing about Mike is that he was never mocking about Ben's weak points. He never even tried to be funny about them. He just quietly understood and accepted.

Ben still feels his cheeks go warm, and it's not just the wine. "Oh... right. Well if you don't need me?" he asks, and Mike waves him on.

He makes his way out to the front of the house, and hears Bev's muffled voice on the front lawn. It's dark, and she's pacing around. He can't really see her, but he can make out her shape, tense shoulders drawn. "Don't fucking call me again, ok. I mean it. I won't pick up," he hears her hiss into the phone, and feels like he's walked into something very private. He tries to go immediately back inside, but she sees him. She jabs a finger at her phone in the way that people used to slam landlines back into the cradle.

"I'm – I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to –" he says, and doesn't even know what he wasn't trying to do.

She looks upset, but brightens on seeing him. "No, don't worry about it. I've barely hung out with you tonight. Wanna sit with me?" she says, walking up to the porch and sitting on the top step.

She rummages in the pocket of her jeans and manages to pull out a small package of cigarettes. "I forget, do you smoke?" she asks, offering the box to him.

He shakes his head. "I did for a bit – y'know, stress – but it kind of messed with my jogging. Thanks, anyway."

She goes to close the box without taking one out. "I can wait," she says, with a guilty kind of smile.

He shakes his head again. "Oh no – feel free to smoke, I'm fine –"

She gives him a strange considering kind of smile. "Ben, it's ok. You're not risking lung cancer because of my bad decisions." She snorts in a rueful kind of way. "Good at making those."

He wants to say something, but he doesn't know what. They stare out at the night.

He gathers his courage, and asks. "So – and if you just want to sit here and not talk about it, that's totally, I understand – but do you want to talk about...whatever's going on with you?"

She stiffens, fiddling with the cigarette packet. "It's not – it's unimportant," she says, quickly.

Ben regrets asking for a moment, as he looks down at the old wooden steps.

"No, sorry," Bev says, softer. "It's not that I don't want to talk with you about it. I just – it's something that is –" he can feel her turning to look at him. He looks at her, and it's hard to see in the gloom but her eyes are glinting. "I don't want to bring it here, you know? I want us to catch up and talk and I don't want you to have to think about it."

She looks pained. Glances down at her arms, crossing them over her chest protectively. His heart aches for her – whatever it is that she won't bring here, although he's got a sick feeling he can probably guess.

He wants to comfort her somehow, but putting his arm around her might be the wrong move, so he doesn't. "I get that," he says, softly. "But you know, you can tell me the bad stuff, too. We used to tell each other nearly everything, you know? That's what I'm – that's what we're here for, Bev."

Bev looks at him, cocking her head to one side and regarding him with a small, happy smile. She drops her arms, looking less tense.

“You’re an incredibly decent man, you know that, Ben?” she says, soft as him. “You always were.”

He’s glad it’s dark. Maybe she won’t pick up that his cheeks are burning. “I – just wanted to be a good friend,” he says, slightly awkward. He thinks about it. “I still do. If you’ll let me.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Bev asks, sounding bemused.

“Because I wasn’t – I lost contact with you. I’m so sorry for that,” he says, and he has to look down, because he’s afraid that even in the dark she’ll see how awful he feels about it, how much it’s been torturing him for the past two decades.

It’s not just about her. Losing touch with all of them was awful – but the loss of her was the worst, he can’t pretend otherwise.

He watches her hand move slowly before he realises she’s moving towards his. She touches his hand, and he’d like to pretend that it doesn’t make his heart jolt, but he’s apparently still thirteen, fifteen, seventeen years old and panicking when they get too close.

Ben bikes out to the forest, intending to go to the clubhouse. Sophomore year is in its waning days, and he could not be more grateful. It’s been a long year.

He was going to see if anyone wanted to come, but Stan had a piano lesson and Richie and Eddie were going to go to the comic book store. He figured Richie wouldn’t want extra company, especially since now Eddie’s time was split between his friends and Carrie, and Richie had looked grateful when he’d said he was going to go to the forest instead.

He hadn’t seen Mike before he left school, and Bill and Bev were probably together. They usually were, if they weren’t with the group. Which was totally fine and normal, and he wasn’t thinking about it at all.

He climbs down the ladder carefully and starts when he turns around and realises there’s already someone in the clubhouse.

Bev holds a hand up, from where she’s lying against the cushions and blankets they’d organised, to have a soft place to sit around. There wasn’t exactly an abundance of furniture he could get down here.

“Just me,” Bev says, looking at him like she’s surprised to see him. “What are you doing here?”

She’s smoking, and it’s not one of her normal cigarettes. It does smell like weed down here, now he thinks about it.

“I can – I can go –“ he says, wondering if she wants to be alone. Wondering where Bill is.

She shakes her head, and pats the spot next to her emphatically. “Ben, no, come sit with me.”

He hesitates. He thinks it’s probably fine when they get to sit next to each other when there’s at least one another person around, but he always feels weirdly guilty doing it when it’s just the two of them hanging out.

She pats the blanket next to her and his resolve crumbles. As it always does.

She smiles when he comes to sit down, and takes a drag from her joint. Her expression soon fades into something less happy. Her eyes are red and her eyeliner is smudged.

“Bev...is everything ok?” he asks.

She snorts. “Yeah, peachy.”

He doesn’t say anything. She turns to look at him, looking guilty. “Sorry, sorry. Thanks for caring, Ben.”

He smiles. “It’s alright.” He waits for a moment. “So, what’s up?”

She sighs, holding the joint between her fingers. “Bill and I had a fight.”

Her voice sounds hurt and angry, but wrapped up in cotton wool. Slightly removed.

He’s not happy to hear it, obviously. He never wants her to be in pain, and he doesn’t want Bill to be in pain either, because they’ve both really been through enough. And yet, there’s always a sliver of his mind, one that he hates but can’t quash entirely, that is morbidly interested to know how bad it looks for them.

He does whatever he can to quash it though, because mostly he just wants them to not be hurting, and to be happy with each other.

“What about?” he asks, as gently as possible.

She takes a drag, and blows out smoke a few seconds later. “Guess I’m about to sound like a real cow, because I’m sitting here, smoking, but – “ she says, bitterly, and takes another drag. She looks at him, and she looks pained. And beautiful, even though she’s upset, but he shouldn’t be cataloguing that, especially not when she’s upset and needs him to be a good friend. Slipping into that without realising makes him feel like a creep.

“I’m not going to judge, Bev,” he says, and she sighs, breathing out smoke. She looks at him again.

“I know.” She looks at her Docs moodily. “We got into it because he thinks Richie and I are skipping and getting stoned together too much. He’s not thrilled about it.”

Ben looks at her, surprised. “He’s jealous of Richie? Does he think –“

Bev laughs, but not unkindly, more surprised too. “No, definitely not.” Her smile sinks, and she continues to inspect her boots. “More that he thinks it’s ‘not a great idea’. Well if the alternative is sitting in Algebra and barely learning shit, while Gretta and them giggle about me, I think it’s a great fucking idea,” she says, hotly. She looks at him, eyes sparking. “What do you think?”

It’s a minefield, certainly. Too honest, and she might get shitty with him too, too much bullshit and she’ll be able to tell, and she won’t feel like she can trust him.

The problem is, he agrees with Bill. They’ve talked about it. He and Eddie have talked about it, and he’s listened to Eddie’s panicked rants on what cannabis can do to a developing brain. It feels like a bit of a betrayal, talking about her with Bill, but that’s a problem with dating within an extremely tight-knit friendship group.

They’re all itching to leave town, certainly, but with Bev and Richie it’s different. They’re – angry. They’re wilder than they were, going feral for

some reason that only they know. Richie has this fire in his eyes sometimes, and if it catches the fire in hers, it feels like they're in danger of burning everything down.

There's something oddly familiar in the way Richie is right now, something recognisable to him. He thinks he might understand sometimes, but he can't quite focus on it, not when he's worrying about Bev. Around the beginning of the school year, she had – fairly unexpectedly, given how much she'd laughed at the idea in the past – joined the cheer squad around the same time Mike had joined the football team. He'd felt weird about it because even if those kids were suddenly accepting of Bev and Mike, it didn't mean that they had to do that for him. But it wasn't about him, so he supported it. It was fine, for a while. They dragged him to a few parties, and they were kind of fun, but he could tell he didn't belong.

Then, maybe two months ago – within a few weeks of each other – Mike had quit the team citing having too much to do (but had privately admitted to them that he just wasn't comfortable being part of team that was alternately creepy to girls, casually racist, casually homophobic, and often all three at once), and Bev had walked out of cheer practice and not come back, saying it had been a failed social experiment on whether she'd ever wanted to be popular, or have to put up with popular-crowd shit.

Ben had secretly thought was a blessing, but she wasn't happy. She wasn't interested in trying anymore, like she was burnt out with the effort of trying really hard all year. She was still kind when she talked to him, and she hung out with everyone, and she still seemed good with Bill, but the only person who seemed to want to match her self-destructive tendencies was Richie.

So they were hanging out a lot, smoking and drinking when they could get their hands on alcohol, and cutting school.

"I think," Ben hedges. "I think this is something you guys are going through, and I can't tell you if you should stop but I guess...I don't understand it. But I'd like to...if you want to. Tell me, that is."

Bev's expression softens, almost in surprise. There's something grateful in it. "Really?"

He nods, almost not wanting to break eye-contact. "Really really. Go

ahead.”

She smiles at him slowly. “Thanks, Ben.” She looks across the clubhouse, and nestles into the cushions. “I know Bill’s worried, but it’s not like... we’re just blowing off steam, you know?”

Ben considers this. “It’s been a long year. Is that all it is?” he asks, gently. He knows it isn’t, but you have to let her admit it, before you start treating it as fact. She’s stubborn, and it’s annoying, and he wishes he didn’t appreciate that about her.

She breathes out, and it becomes a kind of frustrated groan. “You’re telling me. No...it isn’t.”

He waits. She continues.

“I just – you know, I fucking tried, this year. For my whole school life up until this year, I was the girl who didn’t care. I think the last thing I was involved in was the third grade play I was in with Bill,” she says, and laughs, a little too sadly. “Then people...started hearing things. Started talking about me. Started saying – well, you’re familiar.” She stops to take a drag, and waits before she breathes out. “So like, I thought, I’m not a joiner. I’ll just get through this shit while calling as little attention to myself as possible. I don’t care about any of this shit.”

She looks at him, bitterly angry and sad. “And then I got the great idea that maybe, since I had so many guy friends, and I had like, one girl friend, maybe I should try and make more, even though those girls were probably the ones talking behind my back and calling me a slut. Another great decision by me.”

“You were trying something new. Nothing wrong with that,” Ben counters.

Bev snorts. “Yeah. Until they start expecting you to trash other girls, and one of them starts calling you a slut again because she’s mad you’re better at back handsprings or her creepy footballer boyfriend tried to hit on you at a party or whatever.”

Ben frowns, sympathetic. “God, I’m sorry.”

Bev shakes her head. “It’s fine. I was getting sick of the girl-world dynamics anyway.” She thinks for a moment. “Actually, that’s not fair.

Maybe non-popular, non-awful girls are great to hang out with. But those ones...it'd be like, oh we're not talking to Marcy today, she bought the same skirt as me. Such bullshit."

Ben breathes out a low whistle. "Sounds...complicated. And not fun."

Bev laughs a little, a bitter strain still ringing in it. "You're fucking right about that."

She looks at him, and her expression is sad, wild, like she hasn't quite said everything she needs to. "But you know what's the most pathetic thing? I actually enjoyed it, for a bit. Going to games. Hanging out with girls. Going to parties. It felt like – oh this what normal girls do."

Ben looks at her. "You're not pathetic for enjoying that, ok? And you know, you don't have to regret the good experience just because it ended badly. Things are often – "

He searches for the right words. " – terrible and exciting at the same time. Think about the first time I met everyone – I was scared, and humiliated and physically in a lot of pain, but then you –" he catches himself. "You and everyone else were there, and you were all looking after me just like, like you'd known me forever. I'd never been so happy to have such a shitty experience. It's alright to admit you enjoyed parts of it, even when the other bits sucked."

She smiles slowly at him. Her eyes are unfairly bright, no one should have eyes like hers. "You're very wise, Ben," she says. "You wanna smoke?" she asks gently, holding the joint out.

He hesitates. He's not a big fan of getting high, because it leaves him feeling over-aware of his body and under-aware of his actions, if he's staring or smiling too much. But there's something about it right now, her holding out the joint to him, the kindness in her face – he caves, and agrees.

She smiles, with a kind of surprised delight, and holds it out to him. He takes a drag – holds it in his lungs – and only coughs a little as he breathes out. She laughs, a little, but there's nothing mocking in it.

He smiles sheepishly at her. "So, you're out of there though. Now you can

just be who you want,” he says, just a little croakily.

“Ok, well that’s the problem, though,” Bev says, smile fading a little. “I feel like – ever since I walked out, I don’t know who the fuck I am anymore. I thought I was the girl who didn’t give a shit about that sort of thing, and clearly, that’s not fucking true. Even when I was with them – I started to feel like I was no longer the ‘slut’, yay for me, but I was suddenly ‘Bill’s girlfriend’ to everyone. Not even me, anymore –“ she rants, and breaks off, breathing heavily.

“I don’t think of you as ‘Bill’s girlfriend,’” he says, and he regrets taking a second drag because clearly, it’s already working. He passes it back to her, and almost feels shocked when their hands touch. It’s tragic. She looks at him curiously, her breathing returning to normal, and he stumbles out, “I mean, of course, you are – but you’re my friend, first - and I’m sure everyone – but Bill, maybe – the rest of the guys would agree that you’re their friend before you’re Bill’s Girlfriend to them. You’re so much more than that, any day. Someday soon it’ll be more than just us who sees it.”

There’s a moment where neither of them says anything. She smiles at him, so warmly that he might pass out, but he’s afraid to look away. Then suddenly, so suddenly, her eyes are watering, filling up with tears that are breaking past her eyelids and rolling down her cheeks.

His stomach twists with panic, and he hasn’t even smoked that much but he already feels too high. “Hey, hey, hey, I’m sorry, what did I say?” he asks, trying to sound soothing when he’s so worried.

She shakes her head, swiping at her eyes rapidly. “No, no, it’s not you. I’m being stupid. God, I’m too high for this.”

He finds the hanky in his pocket, and silently thanks his mother, this one time, for making him carry one around.

“I promise you it was just washed, and I haven’t used it,” he assures her, tentatively holding it out.

She takes it off him gently, and her hand brushes his again. He wants to die. He kind of wants to stay here forever. “Thanks, Ben,” she says, wiping her eyes, still sounding choked.

"Did I say something? I'm so sorry, I shouldn't even smoke, really," he asks, completely failing not to sound worried.

She chokes out a half-laugh, and smiles a little at him. "No, I'm – I'm just –" her expression starts to crumple, and he's afraid she'll start crying, but she doesn't. "You're all gonna go somewhere amazing soon. Especially you, Ben. You're so smart, God."

He tries not to blush and has a horrible feeling he's losing that battle. She looks miserable.

"You're gonna have college experiences, all of you guys. And it's going to be me, or maybe Mike and I, just stuck in this shithole forever. And Mike deserves to get out of here even more than I do, but it's not like there's much money for either of us to go to college," she says, sniffing. "You know what the totally fucked up and unfair irony of the situation is?" she says, frustration returning.

"What's that?" he asks, tentatively.

"Mike's so smart, he could probably get a scholarship somewhere pretty good. He'd have a hell of a personal essay, I'm sure of it. But even if he does get to go to college, he'll probably stay in the state, so he can keep helping Miriam and Ernie, because he's such a good, selfless, person. And I'm so – I'm so selfish –" she says, and she does start crying, and he can't help it – he puts his arm around her. She nestles into it a bit, and he tries not to think about it. She wipes her eyes, and tries to start again. "It's like – I love you guys, and Miriam and Ernie, but sometimes I think I can't stand another fucking second in this town, and Mike – Mike even suggested that I try and get a scholarship, but I'm not the smart one. I'm fucking doomed to be bagging groceries at the Shop-N-Save until I'm forty." She sniffs into his shoulder, and her hair smells so good, and he is not getting sidetracked. He is being a good friend, even though they don't do this, really. She does this with some of the others, but he stays away from it in a group setting, because he can't trust that he's not going to do something embarrassing. But this is different, and he doesn't comment on it, in case she comes to her senses. Instead he says -

"Ok, Bev, you're my friend, but as your friend I have to tell you when you're just fucking wrong."

Bev looks up at him, taken aback. He definitely swears the least of their group, so when he does, it's to make a point.

He looks at her. "You're not selfish, and you're not stupid, ok? That's the most ridiculous thing ever. You're always looking after everyone, and you're sometimes the only one who can think of something quick enough to shut Richie up when he says something really stupid."

She smiles a little, gratefully. Her eyes are wide and misty, but he supposes that's probably due to the pot and the crying. "You're sweet, but my grades are not scholarship grades."

He shrugs. "So we get them there."

She looks confused, and a little wary. "What?"

"I can work with you. You're so smart, and you know it. With my help – and I can probably get Stan to help with some of it, you know he would in a second, and Eddie – however many of us it takes, we can tutor you. We've got a whole summer ahead, even."

She groans, but then smiles sheepishly. "Sorry, sorry, that sounds really kind."

He smiles. "Yeah, and then next year we send out scholarship applications. It'll be you doing the work, we're just going to help you get there. You can do this."

Her eyes water, but she doesn't cry this time. Then, without warning, she throws her arms around his neck. He's not expecting this, but he finds himself settling into it, hugging her back. She really does smell great, and he's pretty sure she's not even wearing perfume. He's so gone, it's shameful.

She seems to realise that the hug is a bit long at the same moment he does, and she lets him go, trying to extricate herself from his neck and shoulders. Suddenly he's staring at her face, and it's closer than it ever is to him. Her eyes are clearly God's cruel prank on him, because they look like tiny oceans, and he wants to look into them forever. She doesn't break eye contact with him for a moment, and he's not imagining it, she is looking at him in a strange, affectionate way. He wonders if this is what

Bill sees, and understands why he's like that around her sometimes, because it's incapacitating.

Then with a hot twist of guilt in his stomach, he remembers Bill. His friend. Defender from bullies and serial killers and mean girls. Head over heels in love with this girl, who he has been dating for three years. The one Ben is too close to right now.

He pulls back, and she looks surprised. But she also looks slightly guilty too.

"Sorry, I'm – you know how affectionate I get when I smoke. I just meant – thankyou. For being such a good friend," she says quietly, sounding embarrassed. She doesn't meet his eyes. He doesn't attempt to meet them.

He nods, wanting badly to not have this make things awkward. It's way easier if it's only horrifically awkward on his side of things. "Sure, sure," he says, quick and little high. "I mean it, you know. I'm gonna make sure you get there."

She smiles, finally looking at him. "Thanks, Ben. You're really – quality. A quality person."

He chuckles. "Well, I, uh, I try." He looks around, and back to her. "Hey, uh, what's up with Richie, right now?"

She raises her eyebrows in a kind of grimace. "That I don't really know. Well, I have my suspicions, but I don't think it'd be fair to him to tell you. Especially if I'm totally wrong." She shakes her head, and her long hair falls around her shoulders, wafting a strange and – disturbingly – not totally unpleasant aroma of shampoo and weed towards him. "I figure he's gonna do this shit anyway. Least if I'm with him I can keep an eye on him, y'know?" she says, sounding more worried.

"No – I think that's a good thing. He's lucky to have you looking out," Ben says, honestly. He has his own suspicions about what's eating Richie – but if he's wrong, Richie might never want to talk to him again.

Ben can't help looking at her, in the gloom of Stan's parents' front porch. If it weren't for the fact that he feels those years, he might even think no time had passed, like it's still 1994 and they're just

sitting up watching the stars after everyone's fallen asleep at a movie night.

"You don't have to be sorry you didn't stay in touch, Ben. I'm so – I did the same. I'm really sorry," Bev says softly.

"Don't be," he says, because he's not even mad about it. "Life gets in the way. Work...Marriages. I get it."

Bev makes an irritated noise when he says *marriages*, but just nods. She looks at his hand, still touching it with hers. Still making no attempt to move it. "It's just...crazy that *you're* not married," she says, like she's genuinely surprised. "You must be like, the most eligible bachelor in Seattle. Fuck, you could probably *be* The Bachelor, if you wanted," she says, and now she's smiling, and he can just make out its impishness.

He laughs. "Talk about my worst nightmare, Bev. Being on reality TV and having to date like twenty-two women at once. I work so much I barely have time for one."

Bev raises an eyebrow. "That why you're not married?"

He feels his cheeks warming, and feels ridiculous. "One of the reasons, I guess," he says, looking down. "Who are you, my mom?"

Bev laughs, and he's missed it. He wonders how long he can cope with this, before the Olympic-sized torch he's apparently still carrying for her starts burning his fingers. He wonders whether he'll be able to keep in touch with her better this time, and how long Stan needs them to stay.

"If I were Richie, I'd say something really gross right now, so you should be glad I'm not," she says, grinning.

"One of the many reasons I'm glad you're you, Bev," he says, and he's grinning too, but he can't help but mean it. She gives him a look he can't quite parse in the dark. She's smiling but there's something off about it, something maybe kind of sad. She still hasn't moved her hand away. He doesn't either.

It's later than they all realise and everyone is sleepy with wine and a big meal.

Stan realises this is the moment he's been dreading all day, but he accepts it anyway, getting up from the couch where he's been talking to Bill and Mike.

"I guess you're all wanting to go then?" he asks, attempting to stifle a yawn. He hopes it doesn't sound too disappointed.

Bill looks baleful, like he hadn't considered that he'd have to move from the couch again.

Everyone mostly starts moving sluggishly, attempting to get up and failing.

Richie looks at him crankily, over his glasses. "Can't we just stay here? Eddie's definitely had too much wine to drive, he's practically catatonic," he wheedles, indicating Eddie next to him.

"Fuck off," Eddie says, sounding too tired to give it any real heat. He probably shouldn't be driving, to be perfectly honest.

Bev shares a brief look with Mike, and maybe Bill. "Actually, I'm not sure any of us should be driving. You'd kind of be doing us a favour, if a few of us could crash," she says, stretching.

"Fuckin' A, Stan. I might not physically be able to leave this couch. Don't leave us at the mercy of the guesthouse mattresses," Richie says, yawning without trying to hide it.

He knows what they're doing. They did it last night, too. He could point out that Richie had more to drink last night and still drove back home, but he won't. He's just drowsy and grateful that these people are here and are still his friends.

He can feel that everyone's waiting for him to make the decision, trying not to look at him too much. "Well..." he says, slowly, even though he wants to say yes immediately. "There are two couches in here...plus, the twin beds in the guest room. I think we've even got two spare mattress around, if I go get them from the basement, and we've got enough room for them in here. I'm not sure about bedding

though...”

“Actually, remember we found a bunch of surplus bedding stuff in the cupboard down in the basement? I’ll help you grab those and the mattresses from downstairs, if you’re ok with this,” Mike pipes up, next to him.

He smiles a little. “Alright, fuck it, why not?”

Richie cheers. “That’s the man!”

Mike stands, and looks around at everyone. “Don’t think this means Stan’s making any beds tonight. We’re going to get the stuff from the basement, and then he’s going to bed, because he’s already been kind enough to let us stay.”

Richie groans. Stan grins.

Stan’s parents’ basement is a pretty nice basement, as they come. It’s not like the Denbrough’s creepy one, full of old paint cans and DIY paraphernalia – the kind you’d avoid if you possibly could. Stan’s parents actually made an effort to make it nice down here, with lights and furniture. Well there used to be furniture, like a futon. It’s either been packed up or sold, before they died. There’s an exercise bike down here in front of a little television, way more modern than the one that used to be here. They had many a hang-out here, various birthdays, lots of memories. That’s for certain.

Still, Mike can’t shake the feeling that being back down here is weird. A little forbidden.

“So, it’s this cupboard that we found them in, right?” Stan asks, walking ahead and pulling the door open.

“Yep,” Mike says, coming up next to him and helping pull the mattresses out.

Once they have them out, Stan looks at them, and then looks around. “Weird – being down here again, huh?” he says, voice slightly croaky from drinking, maybe. “I keep thinking nothing’s changed, but it

has.”

Mike follows Stan’s gaze to the space where the exercise bike is. “I know what you mean.”

Stan coughs. “Yeah, I guess before this week you wouldn’t have been down here in what, since – “ he asks, looking back at him curiously.

“Ninety-four, I think,” Mike says, although he doesn’t think, he knows. Maybe not the exact date but the year and the month, certainly. He doesn’t press Stan about it, because it’s not important. As unimportant now as the last day he worked at the diner, or the date of the last day of school.

“Right, yeah...” Stan says slowly, rolling the words around in his mouth like he’s tasting a wine at a winery. They’re not as insanely drunk as they were the night before, but they’re not that sober either. Stan has a charmingly pink tinge to his cheeks when he drinks, he’s so pale.

He doesn’t look away from Mike, and Mike tries, as ever to understand what he’s thinking.

Stan swallows. “Um, yeah,” he says, quickly. “We should probably, uh, find that bedding. For everyone.”

Mike is briefly caught off-guard, and recovers fast. He nods. “Right, probably a good idea.”

They look for the bedding, and finding it, put it next to the mattresses.

“You know we’re gonna have to do this in trips, right?” Mike says, and Stan sighs.

He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes, and Mike smiles. “Alright, the sooner we do this, the sooner I can go to bed. But I’m not sleeping with you this time,” he says sleepily, and then his eyes widen. Now his cheeks seem to be reddening from more than the wine.

Neither of them says anything for a moment, and Mike almost wants

to laugh but Stan looks so embarrassed that he keeps it in. The awkward moment sits between them.

“I mean, uh, on your bed, because last night, and I passed out, and you’ll have at least a couch to yourself. Upstairs,” Stan babbles, suddenly alert.

Mike laughs, a little, and it breaks the awkward tension. Stan grins, sheepish, cheeks still a little red. “Sounds great. I really hope Richie doesn’t snore, though.”

Stan coughs a laugh, unexpected. “Yeah, well, that’s your cross to bear.”

Mike laughs. “Asshole,” he says, jokingly.

Mike keeps smiling. Stan smiles back, eyes hazy and warm behind his glasses. He opens his mouth to say something, and Mike waits, and seems to hesitate, and then says, “So, the mattresses?”

Mike looks at them. “We should really rope someone else into helping.”

As if on cue, he hears the door at the top of the stairs open, and footsteps coming down the stairs. Ben and Bill stop on the bottom stairs.

“We figured we should p-probably help,” Bill says, and Ben nods. “We decided that Bev and Eddie should take the beds, especially since Eddie is about five minutes from passing out, and the rest of us will stay in the living room,” Ben adds.

Stan nods. “As long as Mike gets one of the couches. I think he deserves it.”

“Is this your w-way of m-making it up to him for p-passing out in his bed last n-night?” Bill asks, smirking.

Ben raises an eyebrow at Mike. He grins. “It seemed cruel to move him,” he explains. Ben doesn’t ask any more, but smiles a little.

“For that Bill, I’m making sure you sleep on the floor,” Stan

grumbles. “Anyway, you were the one that starfished Mike’s spare bed and made it impossible for me to crash there.”

Bill cackles.

Bev wakes up sharply, and almost stops herself screaming. She’s disoriented for a moment, panicked by a sensation of phantom hands around her neck and arms, covering her mouth, breathing heavy in the dark of a room she doesn’t recognise, ripping her cardigan off because she’s burning up, sweating, until she realises it was a nightmare and that she’s in Stan’s parents’ house.

Stan’s house, now. She should start thinking of it like that.

She didn’t scream, but she couldn’t help letting out a panicked whimper. She wonders if she’s woken Eddie. Hopefully not.

She waits, staring at the ceiling in the dark.

“You...’kay, Bev?” comes Eddie’s very quiet, mostly still asleep voice from the other side of the room. His twin bed isn’t that far from hers. She’s filled with sudden affection, that he’s basically asleep but still trying to comfort her.

“Sorry, Eddie. Bad dream. Go back to sleep, I’m ok,” she whispers.

“Mmm...sure?” he replies, sounding like he’s falling asleep saying it.

“Sure,” she whispers, warmly.

“Mmm,” he says, and she’s sure he’s asleep in the next five seconds.

She lies in bed for a while, but realises she’s not getting back to sleep anytime soon. She sits up, snags her mobile off the end table and her cardigan from next to her, tries to get her cigarettes and lighter out of the pocket of her jeans as quietly as possible, and slips out of the room.

The nightmares aren’t uncommon for her, but it’s been a while since she had one so visceral. It’s probably being back here that’s making it

worse. It's fading now but she has the sense that it was about, maybe, all three of them. A three-headed monster of the monsters in her life, faces shifting into each other with dream logic sensibility.

She shudders, trying not to think about it, slips her cardigan back on, sweat and cold air making goosebumps on her skin. She lets herself out the front door, so she can have a smoke, and already on edge, almost jumps out of her skin when she sees someone already sitting on the porch steps.

She swears, and he turns, and swears too, eyes wide with anxiety.

"Fuck, Bev, warn a guy," Stan says, holding a hand to his heart. Then he looks at her, and his expression softens. "Couldn't sleep?"

She shakes her head, feeling like she must look pretty terrible. He gestures for her to sit down next to him, so she does. Up close she can see he looks haunted too, a kind of distant thousand-yard stare in his eyes she's only seen once before. He's not wearing his glasses, so the effect is more intense. "Me neither," he says, darkly.

She shivers.

They don't say anything for a moment. She likes the feel of the cool night air on her face. It reminds her of sneaking out of the apartment – back when she lived in an apartment with Tom, before they moved into the brownstone – to sit on the fire-escape while he was asleep, and think of ways he might get better, might be better, or how she might leave him. She never did. She always crept back into bed before he woke up.

"You're outside, but you're not smoking?" Bev asks, mildly.

"I just needed some air," Stan replies, frowning.

He looks at the cigarettes in her hand. "Feel free to though," he says, politely.

She holds it out to him. "Do you smoke?"

He smiles in a short, sharp kind of way. "Only when stressed," he says, and takes one from her.

She smiles, but it's not happy, feeling a pang of deep empathy. She lights her cigarette, and then his.

They smoke in silent companionship.

"Sweet fucking *Christ*," Bev breathes out, after a moment. "I can't tell you how badly I needed that."

Stan breathes out. "Fuck, right?" he says, deeply.

Bev nods.

"Was it because of what's keeping you up at, I think, two-thirty in the morning?" Stan asks, quietly. He gives her time to respond. She's always appreciated that about him.

"Yeeeah," she says, quietly. The dream itself is fading but the anxiety and fear it has stirred up haven't yet. The cigarette is helping. That and being around a friend. "Fucking *nightmares*."

He gives her an empathetic look, and doesn't reply for a moment. "Snap," he says, with a humourless, wispy chuckle.

She frowns. "God, I'm sorry."

He smiles a little more at her, still sad but genuine. "Why? It's not your fault."

She shrugs. "I guess...I don't think you deserve it."

He raises an eyebrow at her. "And you do?"

She looks down at the porch steps. "I don't know."

He doesn't say anything for a moment, blowing smoke out. "You wanna talk about it?"

She snorts. "Not particularly."

He grins sharp. "Fair enough."

Suddenly, she feels like she actually *needs* to talk about it. Whatever she can cope with. She swallows.

"I'm used to the nightmares, you know," she starts slowly. She's had them pretty much since she was thirteen – maybe earlier, but definitely, the waking-up-screaming-in-fear ones started around that time. They got slightly better later – sophomore year of high school, she barely had them. In college they were rare – depending on what total dropkick she was dating, they were better or worse – but they came back a few months after she met Tom. "It's like they phase in and out. Sometimes I'm having them a few times a week, sometimes not for months."

"Can I – can I ask what about?" Stan asks, quietly.

She nods, and smiles a little. "For you? Anything," she says, only a little tongue-in-cheek. She really would do almost anything to make him happy.

The sides of his mouth quirk, almost into a smile. She takes a long drag on her cigarette. "Often they're about – him – " she says, forcing the words out. Stan's eyes widen again, and he nods. He knocks his hand against hers – maybe too afraid to take it without asking. She takes it in hers.

Stan gives her a look of wordless empathy, and squeezes her hand. She squeezes back and smiles, very slightly. "I dream he's ... sometimes he's chasing me, sometimes...sometimes, he's choking me again and I can't breathe, and I can't touch the ground, and I feel his breath –" she gasps, and takes another drag of her cigarette with shaking fingers.

Bev realises his hand is trembling too. "I'm – I'm sorry, I'll stop talking about –" she says, and her voice is shaking.

Stan shakes his head, not letting go of her hand. "No, I want to – I'd like to hear it. If you want to tell me." His voice small and shaking too.

She nods. "I think being back here has really fucked me up. My dreams about him were never nice but like, being here it's like it's given them more – juice, or something. They're really vivid – I – I fucking *hate* it," she says bitterly, surprised by how upset she is.

He shakes his head. "Glad it's not just me, I guess," he says, attempting wryness, pitching into a similar bitterness. "I – have them – too," he says, like he's forcing the words out as well. "About...him," he spits. He takes a drag of his cigarette, and his hand is shaking like hers. She squeezes his hand, stroking her thumb soothingly over his skin.

"I dream – I dreamt, before that I was in the sewers again and I was lost, and I tried to call out to you guys – but he was there, and he – and he was so big, so much bigger and heavier, and above me and his nails were digging into my face, and I was so – I was so sure –"

Stan lets out a sort of gasp-sob of horror, and Bev's heart leaps into her mouth. She stubs her cigarette, puts it down, and pulls him into a hug. He snuffles into her shoulder, and she rubs his back. "I'm so sorry...I'm so, so sorry," she says quietly, already crying as well.

He rests his head on her shoulder, after they pull apart, and they look out at the night.

"Look, from personal experience – there's nothing I can say that will make these dreams any less fucked up," she says, sniffing. "But you gotta know we love you. *I love you*. I know my track record for not – forgetting you isn't great. But if you have those dreams, and you're freaking out, just call me. I keep my phone on and I'm not a deep sleeper."

He sits up straight, and smiles softly, red eyed. "Same goes for you, Bev. I mean it. I love you, too. If you need to call, call." He pauses, then continues. "And by the way – you know I don't blame you for getting lost down there, right? For what happened with him? I mean, I don't really blame anyone, but especially not you and Richie."

Her eyes water again. "Yeah, but – if I hadn't been – you wouldn't have all gone down to –"

Stan shakes his head. "We would have ended up there even if none of us got kidnapped. You know what Bill was like on a mission."

She considers this. "I guess, well – I never thought of it like that. I like that."

An image from her nightmare bubbles up, and she shivers, involuntarily, and he puts an arm around her. It's not because she's cold. She kind of wishes she hadn't put out her last cigarette, and she's wondering whether she should have another. She decides to talk about it, even though she never talks about this part of the dreams. Maybe *because* she never does.

"In the dream I saw him. Al. My – my – father," she says, spitting it out like a bite of rotten fruit. She thinks of him as that only in the biological sense, because he gave up the right to any parental affection a long time ago.

Stan makes a quiet noise, somewhere between anger and bone-deep disgust. "Is he there – often – or is it being here?"

She looks down. "Both, maybe," she says, and she hates how small her voice sounds. She's not afraid of him anymore. Except some part of her still is, some part of her is twelve and afraid of him, forever forty and strong in her memory. "I dreamt that *he* turned his face into Al's. He was choking me – and then Al was, and I was – twelve again, and in the kitchen of that shitty old apartment – he was so big – and I couldn't – I couldn't *breathe*," she says, dissolving into sobs. She buries her face in his shoulder, and he holds her, and she can feel him fighting to steady his breathing. He whispers the same things to her as she did to him before, *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry*. It's not much, but it's all they can give each other. Love and support. It's all anyone can do, she supposes.

She rests her head against his shoulder. "I'm so, so goddamn tired of feeling like this. I'm not afraid of who he is now – I haven't seen him in what, twenty-two years? Before that maybe once after he went away? He'd be a weak old man in his sixties now. If he hasn't fucking died. But in my head, he's fucking *still* terrorising me, and he still looks so big, and I still feel so *fucking* helpless," she says, and she's too tired to shout about it but she's shaking with anger and exhaustion.

He keeps his arm around her, and she appreciates the comfort. "In my professional opinion," he says, still a little shaky. It's nice how he manages to say it without it sounding like a boast, not like some guy you meet a party who lectures you about behavioural psychology, but

that's him. "I'd say the trauma doesn't go away, but you can find ways to manage it. To not feel so helpless..." he says, takes a breath, and pauses. "Do you go to a therapist?"

She sighs. "Yes. Whiskey."

He groans. "If I were on the clock, I'd tell you that's not a healthy coping mechanism," he says, wryly, and she grins, a little. "But as your friend, I...can't exactly talk," he says, ruefully.

Her smile goes away, and she wraps her arms around his torso, in a side-on hug. "You don't have to. I just want you to be happy and safe, alright?" she says, letting him go and looking at him.

He looks at her, and his eyes are heavy with feeling. "I want the same for you, you know?"

"Of course, I know that," she says, as normally as she can, even though her throat is tightening already. She tries to smile a little.

He looks down, eyes glancing toward her covered wrists, then back up. "Are you, Bev?" he says, and his eyes are so anxious.

It hits her like a physical shot, and she doesn't know what to say. She's too tired, at two-thirty in the morning, sitting here with him, to lie about it anymore.

"No," she whispers, already feeling tears rolling down her face.

He looks hurt too, but not just sad – grieving. It hurts to see him like this.

"Can I –" he asks, barely audible, motioning toward her arm.

Bev nods, and he very slowly, and with a touch so light and kind that she might have burst into tears if she wasn't already crying, rolls up her cardigan sleeve.

She'd managed to forget how ugly the bruises look, even in the dark.

Stan gasps, a horrified sound.

He strokes a thumb, very-lightly across the bruises, across the small circular burns from when Tom had drunkenly stubbed his cigarette out on her arm – more than once – but never when sober. Which wasn't saying much because he'd grabbed her arms, her wrists, hard enough to bruise purple-black-green when he'd been sober. He'd thrown her around and smacked her in the face when he was sober.

Stan looks furious, disgusted, devastated, but his touch remains gentle.

Across the small, white scars up under her elbow, – tiny cuts really – that she'd made because wanted to feel some kind of release, in an area she could hide them with a long-enough sleeve. That's where his face crumples and he starts to cry, and she's crying too, hanging her head in shame. She did this. Now she's making him feel worse, and she can't even help him.

"May I..." she asks, hoarsely, almost voiceless, motioning to his arms. He hesitates, and then nods.

He's wearing a long-sleeved pyjama shirt, and she, trying to be just as gentle as he was, rolls one of his sleeves up and exposes the bandage under it. She closes her hand around it, very softly, stroking his bandaged wrist with her thumb. She looks at him, and he looks down, and he's still crying, and she throws her arms around him, crying in earnest.

He holds her to him and she holds him back. It feels like they stay like that for a while. She doesn't know though, somehow time doesn't feel real. The night, the dark, the front porch feels like a liminal sort of space, and maybe that's why she felt brave enough to show him. Maybe that's why he was brave enough to show her. They weren't going to judge each other.

He lets her go with a gasp like coming up for air. He wipes his eyes. She takes a moment to wipe hers too.

"That's Tom, right?" he says, quietly devastated, looking out at the trees.

She nods, not even sure if she can talk right now. She looks ahead

too.

“But you – you did some. Cuts.” His voice wobbles, threatening to crack.

She nods again, feeling her eyes water.

He just takes her hand. She holds on.

“So, you know I’ve never been in the business of telling you what to do,” he says, almost-steadily. “But you have to leave him. You can’t go back.”

He doesn’t say it meanly, but it’s a statement of fact, not an opinion. Like there’s been a fire, and she physically cannot go back. She loves him so much – not in the way she loved Bill, more like a brother, someone who was so close to her once. They read together, studied together, on one memorable occasion did drunken karaoke together, and she is only realising now, after seeing him two days ago, how much she’s missed him.

“I know,” she says, quietly. “I already – I had a go bag ready, supposedly for unplanned work trips, but really for if I needed to leave quickly. I wasn’t ... I wasn’t planning on going back.”

He looks at her. “Do you have somewhere to go?”

She shrugs. “I have money of my own. Secret bank account. Long-term, I don’t know.”

Stan shakes his head. “We’ll figure something out. Between all of us –“

Bev shakes her head too, a tendril of icy fear gripping at her gut. “No – no. You can’t – I can’t – I don’t want them to know. Yet, at least. I don’t want B –“ she stammers out, and she doesn’t even know who’s name was going to come out of her panicked rambling before she stopped it.

He squeezes her hand, and nods. “You don’t need to tell anyone, unless you want to, Bev. But just remember – there’s nothing we wouldn’t fucking do for you. I’m sure you don’t need me to remind

you.”

She sighs, accidentally letting out a sob. He looks at her, worried, and she smiles, just a small one but as much as she can. “I know.”

She sighs. “You know, part of the dream that woke me up? Tom was in it. He was Bob Gray, and then he was Tom.”

Stan shudders and shakes his head, wordlessly angry, but not at her.

“I keep – I keep worrying he’s gonna come here. He keeps calling and I haven’t been picking up,” she continues, and then remembers earlier, with a hot twist of anger. “Actually, I picked up earlier. Just to get him to stop texting me. Bad fucking idea, as it turns out. “

“Does he know where you are?” Stan asks, seriously. “How did you... leave things?”

Bev looks down, holding tightly to his hand. She has flashes of it – *Tom screaming at her – the bedroom, with its perfectly styled furnishings, one of which she’d picked up – rough hands pushing her onto the bed.*

“Not well.” An understatement if there ever was one. Stan looks patiently on. “I told him it was an emergency. That I had to go home. Not that I thought he’d accept it, but I told him what had happened – I said it was a female friend, because any time I even mention –“ she breaks off, angrily. He holds onto her hand, but not so tight that it hurts.

“Anyway, he accused me of lying, which might seem like he was on the money but it’s pretty much his go-to move. Stopped clock’s gotta be right twice a day, right?” she says, with bleak humour. “And then he went for his other one. I hit him with something on the bedside table, I don’t remember what. I grabbed my bag and ran out. But I never told him where I grew up, so he wouldn’t know.”

“No-one’s going to love you like I love you, Bev! You’re damaged goods, baby! And I’m the only one who’ll take them on!” he was howling, but she didn’t dare look back. She was already gone, even though it was raining like crazy and she hadn’t called an Uber, she just kept walking until she saw a cab she could hail.

She doesn't tell Stan this.

"Fuck," Stan says, with feeling. "I'm glad you're out of there."

He looks suddenly so guilty. "I wish I'd been a better friend, after college. I wish I'd been there for you."

She looks at him, gently. "Hey. That fucker made sure I missed your wedding. And that was at the start of our relationship. Back when I still told him about having male friends. We're here now, and that's all that matters to me."

Stan shakes his head again, angrily, and then looks at her, sort of bewildered. "Why would he be threatened by me being your friend at that point? I was literally *getting married*."

This surprises a laugh out of her. "Well, the jealous psychopathic mind can twist anything to convince itself of its own insane theories."

He shakes his head once more, half-smiling ruefully.

She decides she wants another cigarette. She drops his hand, lights one up and offers the box to Stan. He looks at it for a moment, and then says, "Fuck it, why not," and takes one.

She takes a drag, and blows out smoke, and it is glorious again. "Tom hated me chain-smoking," she says, with vindictive satisfaction. "He used to use it as an excuse to lay into me."

Stan winces, slightly. He stares at a point ahead on the lawn. "Patty didn't like me smoking. But she never said much about it. Maybe once or twice. She didn't smoke. Doctors, you know. I quit for her, for a long time."

Patty, Bev thinks. The big mystery.

She'd never met Patty in person. She'd seen photos of them together. Stan had sent them in emails. She'd always liked the look of her – kind-eyed, warm. They always looked rapt to be together, and in a real way, not the way Tom and her would smile when they posed for photos together with no real warmth in it.

There's silence for a while as they smoke.

Bev doesn't want to ask, but she can't help herself.

"What...happened, to your marriage? It didn't seem – I never saw you together, I guess, but you seemed to be the one with the really good one..." she says, and then cringes. "Don't answer that if you don't want to. I'm...in a weird headspace, thinking about Tom."

He lets out a weak chuckle. "It's ok. I understand."

They sit silently for a few more moments. He stares into the branches of the tree ahead. She slips her cigarette to her left hand, a skill she's perfected, and slips her right into his again.

He glances at her, looking grateful. His eyes are misty. She gives him an empathetic look and squeezes his hand.

He looks down, and gulps, then looks up and straight ahead, back at the trees.

"Patty and I were..." he starts, and trails off almost immediately. Bev waits for him.

"We were good," he says, heavily. "We – were genuinely so in love. In fact, we were more than just *good*, we were great."

He exhales miserably. "And she's so intelligent, you know, even though she doesn't try to brag about it. So intelligent, and really good at her job, so, uh..." he trails off, takes a drag, and blows smoke out. "She got this job offer. Headhunted to apply for it because they knew of her. Once in a lifetime kind of thing, you know? The sort of thing, you turn it down, you regret it. And she was like, trying to downplay how much she wanted to do it. Pay was really good, although that wasn't why she wanted it. She wanted it because she could help people on a larger scale," he says, blinking furiously for a moment.

"What was the job?" Bev asks, gently.

"It was with the World Health Organisation. In a role that would mean she'd get to be a part of research teams and still work with people in major studies. It was pretty much her dream job." He

breathes out, morosely. “I told her to take the interview.”

“So, that’s where – Washington, right?” Bev asks. It’s not that far from Atlanta – she wonders if Patty took it, and assumes she did. Surely they wouldn’t have dissolved a twenty-year relationship and long term loving marriage over a job a state or two over. She can’t picture it.

Stan sighs, and there’s something broken in it. “I wish it had just been Washington. I could’ve done Washington, you know. It wouldn’t have been great to leave my practice in Atlanta, but I would’ve done it – I would’ve, I would’ve done –” he breaks off with a jagged gasp.

The sound is painful to her, the sound of someone who has thought about this a lot, who is still torturing themselves over it. She’s not unfamiliar with the feeling.

“Oh, hon,” she says, softly.

Stan looks at her, pained. “But it wasn’t – it wasn’t in Washington. It was in Copenhagen.”

Bev sucks a breath in sharply. “Oh.” Copenhagen was a *bit* more of a commute from Atlanta.

He looks down again, at the old steps they’re sitting on. “And even then –” he says, breathing jaggedly. “I might have – a move like that, sure that would be hard but not impossible. We’d have to leave our friends, but honestly I’m not that close with any of them, you know. Couple friends. Patty’s friends’ husbands,” he says the last thing with a vague hint of derision.

“Mhmm,” she agrees, in the same tone. She and Tom have *couple friends*. She gets along fine with the wives but she’s not close with them. They want to talk about spin class, and going to Turks and Caicos, and their children, and how gorgeous the new line is. They don’t want to talk about her arms, covered in makeup when she needs to wear something sleeveless or go out in public. Still, the bruises would be visible if you really looked. They don’t want to talk about the edge in Tom’s voice when they get together for dinner, and he’s had a few and he’s talking to her. It’s not their business.

Stan looks back at her and nods, understanding.

“I thought I knew what the job entailed when she applied for it. I figured we’d cross that bridge of ‘are we going to move to Denmark’ if she got it. Then she did, and I thought, maybe we will? You can live in Denmark without knowing much Danish. Not sure whether I could’ve gotten a job in my field there without having to recertify, but that – I didn’t care about that. I’d drive Ubers around Copenhagen if I had to, you know? It wasn’t about the money. I’d have taken almost any kind of job there if it meant we would be together, like we’ve been for the last twenty years. Pretty much I’ve spent the majority of the last twenty years with her – give or take the couple of months we broke up in late senior year,” he adds, with a rueful almost-smile, like the time they were broken up is almost nothing compared to how much time they’ve been together. “Almost my entire adult life, I’ve spent with her.”

He breaks off, and sniffs. She can see his eyes are watering again. She squeezes his hand and he squeezes back, holding on to her like a lifeline.

“But, it wasn’t just that. Of course it couldn’t just be that. The job required a lot of travel, too – the main Europe office is in Copenhagen but they have studies set up in a few countries. They needed someone to be based in Copenhagen, and to fly out regularly to London and other parts of Europe, and on rare occasions out to parts of Asia,” he says, voice deadened.

Bev sucks in a breath again. “Oh. Yeah, that sounds intense,” she says, sympathetically. She looks at him. “So what did you do?”

He shrugs, looking suddenly helpless. “I wanted – I wanted her to have her dream job. I wanted to go with her. But the thought of – being by myself in a foreign country, probably being an Uber driver or something, probably not practicing in the job I studied for a *long* time to work in, and leaving the practice I started and grew into a successful, if small, office while she wasn’t there half the year – and probably very busy when she would be there – we both knew it was unworkable,” he says, voice shaking, and she wonders if he’s said this to anyone yet, out loud, because he seems to need to say it, like he can’t stop now he’s started.

He grimaces, and starts to speak again, but all that comes out is a choked noise. He swallows, and tries again.

“She had a while to decide, because at that level they give you time to start packing up your life and make the big decisions,” he says, and there’s a hint of bitterness in it, but it doesn’t seem directed towards Patty.

That’s another thing that is beautiful and rare about him, like the kind of bird he would wait up for and be excited to see. He doesn’t seem to hate her – even though he could find several excuses too. He doesn’t hate her, although he’s unhappy with his life. It’s depressingly rare in a lot of husbands.

“So it became not should we move to Copenhagen, but should you take your dream job? We tried to look at it from every angle – could she go without me and we’d commit to visiting each other when we could? Could I come with her on her work trips? Could she stay in Atlanta and try and find something higher level there?” He coughs a bitter almost-chuckle.

“We both knew there wasn’t some magical solution. There were two very simple options, and both were going to hurt like hell. I didn’t want her to leave me and she didn’t want to leave, but I felt like – she admitted as much, near the end – that if she didn’t take the opportunity, we could have a nice life like we’d been having. We could have had another twenty years together, and we’d be comfortable, and we’d be – we’d be in love –“ he says, and his breath hitches on a sob. He clutches her hand tightly, but not uncomfortably.

“Hon,” she whispers, voice heavy with tears already.

He shakes his head. “But it was just – we don’t have any kids, we decided a while ago that we weren’t going to – we don’t have anything to divert our attention. It’d just be us, and I feared – I was scared that she’d end up resenting me, as much as she told me she didn’t care about any job as long as we were together. I think she was scared of that too, as much as she didn’t want to be. Twenty years of built up resentment, rotting away our relationship.”

He's crying silently now, and so is she.

"There was a moment, near the end – where we both knew she had to take it, and we just sat together and held each other and cried," he says, and he breaks fully at this, chest-heaving sobs. She holds him again, and he cries into her shoulder. She cries too, for him, for them, for all of them – seemingly unable to break the cycle of misery, unable to properly be happy.

She looks at him, holding his face, stroking the small white scars on the sides. "Oh honey...is that ... is that why?" she asks, a pained whisper. She shouldn't ask, but she has to know.

Stan suddenly looks very small to her. There's a great deal of affection in his eyes, though, when he looks at her. He blinks. "No," he says finally, hoarse from crying. "At least I don't think – it might have led to it, but it wasn't – No," he says, definitively. "I wouldn't do that to her."

"Did you ever tell her about – " she asks, very quietly, dropping her hands but still looking at the scars. They're so small now, barely noticeable, unless you know what you're looking for.

Stan's eyes widen slightly, but he nods. "Took me a long time," he says, ruefully. "I was stupid – here's me studying to become a therapist, doing psych classes, learning about *repression* and *trauma* and *coping mechanisms* and I thought I could just bury it and not tell anyone about it. I didn't want to tell her about it at all because I wanted her to like me and think I was normal. Not damaged goods."

Bev feels a spike of ice-cold fear shoot up her spine making her shiver involuntarily. *Damaged goods.*

"You're not, Stan. Not then, not now. You're a person who's been through some shit. You're still a person," she says, looking at him seriously.

He smiles weakly. "I guess that's true. I don't feel like it sometimes, but thanks anyway." He looks down. "It got harder to hide when we started sleeping together. I would wake up screaming sometimes and I wouldn't tell her what it was I dreamt about. She'd ask me where I

got my scars, was it a childhood injury, and I wouldn't tell her. We started fighting. Turns out, hiding a whole part of your childhood that still directly affects your psyche is not a great idea in a relationship," he says with what is almost a chuckle. More like a rueful wheeze.

She nods, raising her eyebrows. "I'm sure a few of us could have used that wisdom in our lives."

Stan nods. "Yeah. I told her it was something bad that happened when I was a kid, but I didn't talk about it any more than that. She didn't press me. We were just out of college when I had a panic attack one night and she asked me to tell her, just so she could understand. And – surprisingly enough, because it's not like I studied psychological care plans for trauma victims or anything," he says, with the barest hint of a self-deprecating smile. "It felt so much better to tell her. She understood, and she didn't look at me weirdly, she was just sorry for me. We carried it together after that."

Something about that makes her feel both happy for him and hurt for herself. She wouldn't have dreamt of telling Tom about Bob Gray – he already knew about her dad and had used that to his advantage, holding it over her head. Something she told him when she thought she could trust him, when she thought they really were in love. A long time ago. She didn't make that mistake twice.

"So, she's in Copenhagen or somewhere in Europe right now?" she asks, gently.

"Yep. Copenhagen, currently." She looks at him curiously, wondering how he knows.

He looks a little sheepish, but mostly just sad. "We haven't been that great at – cutting the cord, entirely," he explains, sighing. "We keep up with each other. Phone calls, and emails. Every so often. It's not like – every day, or anything. But especially since I –" he breaks off, and looks down. "My therapists – in the hospital and my usual – recommended I didn't lie to her about it." He shakes his head. "She was in the middle of this big project, and she was so busy, but she still wanted to get on the next flight back to Atlanta. She was –" he breaks off, and takes a gasping breath, ragged, remorseful. "She was

so – devastated. I almost wished I'd let her go on thinking I was fine. But it would be such a big lie – it would hurt so much more if she found out accidentally. We talked for a long time, and I told her it wasn't her fault. It wasn't because of us. It was me. There was a lot of crying, because that's apparently all I do now," he says, wet-eyed and sniffing, with that same almost-smile.

Bev rubs his back.

"I talked her down from that, and we decided she'd just check in with me when she could. Make sure I was doing ok. That I had people around."

She nods. "I'm glad she knows that you do." She pauses, and then continues. "Didn't you... want her to come back?"

He sniffs loudly, lets out that same weak wheeze-laugh. "I – maybe, yes. But we're not together now. I know she would have done it, and I would have been *grateful* to see her, but it wouldn't change things." He looks at her miserably. "I didn't want to be the asshole that does some kind of sick powerplay like that. Letting her go, and then making her come back and look after me, the worst thing I could do." He sounds bitter now, but it's directed at himself. She puts her arm around him. He leans into her shoulder again. "And, a little part of me thought – what would be the fucking *point* of us going through all of that if she was going to chuck it in to come back to me. Even if she could get a bit of time off without pissing her bosses off, she'd have to go back sooner rather than later. It's been a year, you know? I don't actually think it would have been – healthy for either of us, in the long run."

He sighs, heavy with tears. She hugs him one armed, and he keeps his head on her shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess I understand what you mean. You'd already started on that path, and nothing would have really changed if she came back. And she enjoys the job?" Bev asks, not sure what she's hoping to hear.

"Loves it. She used to downplay it a bit, maybe to make me feel better, but I said that it would make me feel worse if it wasn't what

she hoped for. She's so good in it, and I think she downplays how good she is. She's not braggy like that. I know she is, though," he says, almost smiling again.

He really loves her, still, she thinks. He probably always will. "Well, I'm glad she's enjoying it, at least. Makes at least a part of that pain worth it."

"Mhm," he says, emphatically.

He sighs again, lifting his head up.

"She was always – there though, for the nightmares. We were rarely apart. Even if one of us had to make a work trip. If I had a bad night, I could always call, and she always picked up. Even if it was the middle of the night," he continues wistfully.

"And then she wasn't – she wasn't there. The nightmares had become less...frequent, for a while, but they started happening more and more." He stops and takes a breath. She can feel him trembling. "I thought I could handle it. I went to work. I tried to take sleeping pills, but they only made the dreams worse and harder to wake up from – " he breaks off, and she holds him as he shivers violently for a moment. She waits for his breathing to return to normal, or semi-normal.

"I know about that," she says with deep understanding, and realises she's shivering a little herself. She didn't like sleeping pills for that reason either, and because they made her sluggish. She liked to have clear reflexes around Tom.

"And then – then –" he chokes out. "My parents get into a car accident, from which they died instantly. No need for me – for me to come back. Same year –" he breaks off, with a half-swallowed sob. He looks up at the sky. "And the nightmares are getting worse, and I can't keep calling her about them, because we need to be learning how to be without each other not fucking becoming *more codependent*, and I can barely work, and I have to organise the funeral, so I take some time off. And I stopped taking my meds." Stan breaks off again, and doesn't speak for a moment. When he continues, there are tears in his eyes. "But that just means I'm home,

all the time, and it's this place that doesn't feel like mine anymore. She's not there, and it's full of our memories, and I can't go see my parents, and I realise I don't really have any friends, ones that I could talk to, and I don't have a home – anywhere –“ he says, and he's crying again. She's crying too, holding onto his hand tightly.

“I *loved* you all, and I lost you all too, and I didn't even realise it till it was too late. I suddenly realised I don't have *anything*, and I start thinking, God really fucking hates me, huh? I don't know what I did, but perhaps he's testing me, like Abraham. He wants me to suffer like fucking Job. And I can't sleep because I keep seeing *his fucking face, his awful breath in my face, and he's so much bigger* and I'm exhausted all the time and I just wanted – I just wanted it to stop. I wanted to just – stop, I was just so fucking *tired* of being scared –“ he breaks down completely, and lets her hold him. She couldn't say which of them is crying more. She has never hated herself more for falling out of contact with him when she could have helped him.

“I'm so, so sorry you felt so alone,” she says, grief-stricken, into his shoulder. Her eyes and throat feel swollen from crying – a feeling she's used to – but this time it feels not just devastating but strangely cathartic, like he needed to say this and she needed to hear it. “I know I can't go back and be there for you, but I'm here now. Whenever you need me.”

“Don't apologise. You came – you put yourself in *danger* –“ he replies, muffled, voice breaking slightly on the last word. “Because you wanted to support me. You've already gone above and beyond.”

She looks at him, slipping her hands around his wrists softly. He looks like a mess and she probably looks worse, but it's dark and it's only them out here, so it doesn't matter. “I'm just so glad you're still here. Whatever higher power I have to thank, even if it's your vindictive Old-Testament motherfucker, I will,” she says and he laughs weakly.

“Yeah, I'm not sending him any thanks, currently, but that's between me and him,” he says, an undercurrent of bitterness in it. “But you could send a fruit basket to the poor housekeeper I forgot to cancel, and probably traumatised,” he says, deeply guilty. “Rosa. She visited me in the hospital. She saved my life,” he says, his eyes watering

again. He blinks it away.

“Well, then we’re all in her debt,” she says, smiling a little. Her cheeks feel strange, smiling after crying for so long. But she’s genuinely smiling this time. She drops her hands from his and thinks of something. “You really don’t have to go into it more but – what happened with the funeral?”

He nods, and she can see that guilt is still in his expression. “My cousin Mary took over the planning. My parents always liked her. But I – I was in the hospital when they had to have it, so I couldn’t go...” he says, shakily, and she’s worried this will tip him over again, but he just sits speechless, and she can tell he’s grieving them. She doesn’t remember grieving her own mother because she was too young to understand what it was. She doesn’t really even remember her. How awful to have your parents die at this age, when you’ve known them your whole life. Or – more foreign to her – when you’ve loved them your whole life.

“I’m sorry,” she says and wishes she could say more. He smiles, sad but grateful.

“It was – it happened,” he says, simply. “I told Patty about it, so she wouldn’t feel like – it was about us. Or that was the only thing. It wasn’t her fault that the timing of it all was *fucked*,” he says with a rueful little half-laugh. “That was another reason she wanted to come. But I told her that I would have to miss the funeral and she wouldn’t get here in time anyway. She was – *is* – extremely kind like that.”

Bev nods. “She sounds it. I always thought she looked kind, in your photos.”

Stan smiles a little, wistful but kind of proud. He sniffs. “God, I need a tissue. And a drink, maybe.”

She considers it. “That sounds amazing. Can we do it without waking everyone up?”

“If we walk down the hall very quietly, and get into the kitchen from that door we can.”

"Sounds amazing. They don't need to see this mess," she says, half-joking but half-serious.

Stan's poured them a little bit of whisky each, and they're standing in the kitchen, with one little light on. They've managed to clean themselves up, and are still red-eyed and puffy but they haven't cried again.

He looks at Bev – the kind of friend who will comfort and cry with you at two in the morning and drink with you at three, and is filled with gratitude and affection for her. For all of them, but especially her right now. "I honestly – I can't believe you're all here for me. I'm lucky to have friends who are so – extremely generous."

She smiles a little and her eyes are still a little sad, but they're also soft and full of affection. "I'm just sorry...that it wasn't sooner. And that it took this to bring us together." She thinks. "Even though it's a bit weird, being back here with everyone."

He coughs out an unexpected laugh. "It is, a bit. Good weird though."

"Good weird," she agrees, with an enigmatic smile.

He looks at her, finding himself smiling a little too, thinking of something. "So, I guess it's weird being around Bill again. After so long."

She looks at him, surprised, and smiles curiously. "Still watching everyone, then?" she says, but it's affectionate.

"It's not hard. None of y'all are subtle," he says, drily, deploying the *y'all* with something like irony.

She gasps quietly in mock-outrage, putting a hand to her chest, and sips her drink. She relaxes, and looks at him very honestly. "It is weird to see him. He's actually doing it – the thing I always thought he would, and I'm so proud to see it."

"Hey, so did you," Stan says, wanting to defend her – even from herself.

She smiles. “Yeah, I kinda did,” she says, and then her smile falls. “He did it without shackling himself to a creep, though.”

Stan frowns, too. Like that was her fault, that it was harder for a poor girl on college scholarship to be successful without partnering with someone more privileged. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. He didn’t have to.”

She nods, smiling gratefully at him.

“I can’t believe he married someone famous – like, famous-famous,” she says, suddenly. “From what I’ve seen of her, she seems so – cool and charismatic, and he’s *such* a dork,” she says, startling a laugh out of Stan. She laughs too.

He doesn’t really understand, but maybe he does. He thinks about their conversation in the study, and thinks, if that was what she saw in Bill he’d understand.

“I have no idea, either,” Stan says anyway, grinning. “I’m really not aware of these things, but I think I saw one of her movies a couple of years ago with Pat. From what I remember the movie wasn’t great, but she was good.”

Bev nods. “She’s good at what she does.”

She looks strange, kind of wistful. He thinks about them today, laughing with each other about the prom photo. About Bill saying, “We make a good team,” and the look on his face.

She catches his eye. “What?”

“Nothing!” he says, innocently.

“Come on, I feel like you can tell me. It’ll hardly be the worst thing either of us has heard tonight,” she says, half-jokingly.

He smiles a little. “Ok, but you asked. I guess I’ve just been – noticing ... you guys seem pretty close, still. Like...not much has changed, with you.”

She’s surprised by this, and there’s a flash of guilt in her eyes, but

only briefly. “I –“ she starts, and he thinks she might disagree, and then she sighs. “I thought about lying to you, but I’ve told you much worse things tonight, I guess. I don’t know. He’s – Bill,” she says, simply with a small chuckle. Stan feels like it would be inappropriate to agree with a, “I feel you, sister,” but he gets it.

She contemplates her glass and looks up at him. “I guess – this is just probably not the best time for me to get back in contact with my high school boyfriend who I loved a lot, and who I had some very good, relatively easy, years with. And he’s handsome, and somehow as charming and dorky as ever, and there’s *something* there,” she says with a little smile, sipping her drink. Her smile fades as she continues. “And he’s married. To a beautiful, younger, famous actress who he probably loves a lot, and maybe I’m just projecting onto him. I don’t know.”

Stan nods, finishing his drink. “Yeah, there is that,” he says. He looks at her. “Not that I’m suggesting anything – I’m not trying to wreck everyone else’s marriages because mine is wrecked,” he starts, and she regards him with interest. “But, y’know, he didn’t bring her. He didn’t say how long he’d be here, either.”

Bev sips her drink. “Yeah, but she’s the lead in his movie. She couldn’t exactly pack up and leave. They needed her there anyway.”

Stan nods. “Again, not implying anything. Maybe everything is fine with him and I’m just bitter, but ... I know he came here to support me, and I couldn’t be more grateful, but I kind of get the sense he was grateful too, to have an excuse to get away.”

Bev drinks, looking thoughtful. “Well it’s not like it matters. Whatever’s going on with him, whatever’s going on with me. We’re here to support you, above all else.”

She looks at him over the top of her drink, and he’s sure it’s how he looked at her before. Like there’s something she is dying to say but is stopping herself.

“What?” he echoes.

“Nothing,” she echoes, just as innocently.

He gives her a look. "You made me tell you mine. C'mon, you can tell me. I can handle it."

She looks somewhat guilty, but she's also giving him a look of immense care. She bites her lip. "Ok, but please don't be mad."

"Why would I –" he says, suddenly apprehensive, but still very curious.

"Are you sure you want to know?" she asks.

"Well, kinda now, yeah. What is it?" he replies, with a half-chuckle.

She gives him an empathetic look. "Well, it's kind of like your question...Is it the same with you and Mike?"

Well. He hadn't been expecting that. He's shocked speechless. She watches him anxiously.

"What?" he asks. Vaguely panicked, mostly just kind of stunned.

She looks guilty. "I'm sorry, I'm – we were being honest and I thought you might need someone to talk to about it, but if that's not the case, I'm really, really sorry. I'm not trying to embarrass you."

He softens, because obviously she isn't. "How did you –?" he says, trailing off into confusion. He thinks about it, arrives at the obvious conclusion and shakes his head. "I can't believe Mike told you. I know you told each other everything, but he promised he wouldn't... do that..." he says, trailing off again. Wondering whether it's a bad decision or a worse decision to pour himself another finger of whiskey.

"Stan, I promise he kept your secret," Bev says, pained. He looks up at her, confused. No one else knew about it, he's certain. They weren't exactly strolling down main street hand-in-hand. If someone else had known, everyone would have found out, and it wouldn't have been pretty.

"How, then? I don't think anyone else knew..." he asks. Not even mad, just completely baffled.

“He was gone so much, that last summer. And it wasn’t just work, you know, he hung out with us but he was gone a lot more than he had been. Maybe no one else noticed it, but I lived with him.” Bev looks worriedly at him. He can feel himself blushing already, which is embarrassing. He’s not a teenager anymore.

“So – I found him sneaking into his room one night and I asked him what was going on. And he didn’t want to say, but I was worried that he was getting into something dangerous maybe and we ended up talking. He told me he was dating someone – “ Bev pauses, like she’s remembering it. “No, he told me he was in love with someone and they loved him, and that he was going to spend as much time with them before college as he could. He told me it was a guy, because he knew I wasn’t going to care. He wouldn’t say who, or if I knew them or not. He didn’t give you up.”

“Oh,” he says quietly, because *he told me he was in love with someone* keeps playing in his head. It’s not *news* to him, but it’s like she’s kicked open a door that was already partly ajar – the words remind him of the pain he’d locked away for a long time, not entirely forgotten but out of sight. It’s not totally her fault, but he had been keeping up a sort of plausible-deniability thing with himself, since he’d come back and seen Mike again.

“But how did you know I was the, uh,” he says, currently unable to properly finish his sentences.

“Well I didn’t know, then,” she says, eyes still on him. “I thought it might be Richie, for a bit.”

“Richie?” he starts, trying to keep his voice down, startled into a stifled laugh.

“I didn’t think that for very long!” she says defensively, trying to stifle her own laugh. “I think we both know if Richie was in love with anyone it wasn’t Mike,” she says, with a soft smile.

Stan raises his eyebrows, giving her a knowing look. “Mmhmm.”

She looks back. “I think in the back of my mind, I had an idea. You were gone a lot that summer, and there’s only so many piano lessons

and errands to do for your dad that you can do,” she says gently. He rubs the back of his neck, definitely feeling himself blushing now. He’s wondering if anyone else in the group put it together, but the beauty of that summer was that everyone seemed wrapped up in their own drama. Except Bev, clearly.

“And, if you remember, you came out to me as bisexual five seconds after I did to you,” she says, with a soft laugh. He chuckles, remembering visiting her at NYU in 1996, sitting on the roof of her dorm after a big party. They’d dropped acid with a few dorm-mates and people on her floor, he’d hooked up with her roommate a cute, petite black girl with trendy glasses and long, slick dreads. They’d smoked on the roof in the early morning, and it had all come out, so to speak.

“So it wasn’t like that was impossible, for you. But it was –“ she says, and pauses. “It was yesterday, when we were in the clubhouse. The way he looked at you. I’d been seeing that since the restaurant, but I don’t know – maybe it was all the talk about Prom that made me think about where Mike was, because he made sure Bill and I had the farmhouse to ourselves,” she says and smiles, almost a little embarrassed, but she moves past it. “I know he didn’t end up at Ben’s, so I just wondered if – “ she says, and then looks at him, worried again. “I really didn’t mean to bring it up, if it’s uncomfortable for you. I just... meant it when I said I’d be here for you from now on. And if no-one else knew then you might need someone to talk to about it.”

She’s so worried and now that he’s over the shock of her knowing something he’d thought was long-lost in time, he feels deeply guilty that he’s made her feel bad.

Her hand is on the counter, and he puts his over hers and squeezes. “Hey, we were *just* talking about you and Bill. Tit for tat,” he says, and she smiles a little more. “And also, I don’t mind you knowing about it Bev,” he says, softer. “I wanted to tell you so much, back then. Even when we were on the roof, when I told you I was bisexual – I chickened out of telling you.”

He looks at her, feeling another wave of gratitude and affection for her, and how much she cares. She just looks deeply relieved. “This is

so not a rebuke, but you could have told me. You and Mike were – still are, in fact – two of my favourite people in the world. I would've been thrilled for you," she says, earnest and quiet.

He looks away for a moment, and then back, feeling rueful again. "I couldn't, though. Because I was barely coping with how quickly it started and how quickly it ended and if I told you – you'd know how much I felt for him, and I was trying to pack those feelings away, not fling them everywhere. It wasn't because – It wasn't because I didn't trust you, ok?" he says, and she smiles, understanding.

"I know," she says. "So...don't tell me if it's too much for you right now, but...why did it end so fast then?" she asks, slowly, an empathetic look in her eyes. "I just remember Mike telling me about this person that he was in love with. He was about the happiest I've ever seen him, and you know he was a pretty happy looking guy normally."

He smiles, sadly. "Well, I've already told you my Patty drama tonight. You might as well hear the Mike stuff too, I guess. If you can't get enough of me ruining my own life." His voice trembles, but maybe he's cried so much tonight he's tapped out. Wouldn't that be nice.

"You wanna sit down though?" he asks, gesturing at the kitchen stools. She nods and they walk around the counter to sit in them.

He takes a breath, looks at her. "Let me tell you about prom night, although I'll leave out the gory details," he says, attempting his usual wry smile.

Bev grimaces. "If there are any, please do. You're talking about my brother here." She grins. "Also, I knew I was right about prom night."

"Do you wanna hear the story or not?" he scolds, and she nods, still grinning. He smiles, and it's a strange feeling. Willingly ripping the lid off a box he'd taped up and shoved into a cupboard a long time ago. One that, to be fair, inched closer and closer to falling out of that mental cupboard every day he spent with Mike.

"I'm fine, Stan. I'm fuckin' fine," Richie protests, swaying where he stands.

Stan glares at him. He's obviously not fine. He's drunk – he'd snuck a fucking hip flask into Prom, because of course he did – and he's gotten poor Ben drunk too.

Mike had been trying to keep an eye on them. He had managed when they were all dancing together, having fun, but then people had peeled off with partners, and Mike had been asked to dance by one girl, and then another, and he'd gone with it.

He and Mike had pulled Ben and Richie outside, mainly to stop them attracting the attention of the head – school might be pretty much finished, but they didn't want to risk anything.

Ben was a much more pliable drunk than Richie. Mike had him sitting down against the wall, taking in the outside air. He was also less drunk than Richie, who was attempting to fight his way past Stan to get back into the gym.

"Come on, Stan, I gotta get back in there – I gotta – " he says angrily, drunkenly uncoordinated and limby as a newborn deer.

"What? You're not going back in there. You'll get yourself expelled for fuck's sake," Stan tells him, hands on his arms to try and steady him.

"You think you can take me, Stan the Man? Stanislavsky? Stan Urine?" Richie says, pushing him. It's not hard. Stan scowls at him, mostly because the last nickname is his all-time most hated and Richie knows this.

"Any day, Richie, but I don't want to fight. I want to get you to bed, because you're drunk and you need to sleep it off," he replies drily.

Richie bats his eyelashes clumsily at Stan. "Ooh, Stan, I had no idea – " he says, in a silly voice, and Stan narrows his eyes. Richie pauses. "They're playing –" he says.

Stan listens out. It's muffled, out here, but it sounds like The Cranberries. That one song – maybe it's on one of Richie's mixes?

Richie holds up a finger, like he's going to say something but then he opens

his mouth and vomits on Stan's shoes.

"Fucking hell, Richie!" he shouts, stepping back but not fast enough to avoid the spray. He looks down. His shoes are wrecked. His pants have avoided the worst of it, but there's definite splashback.

He looks back to yell some more at Richie, but Richie is standing there, suddenly looking so sick and forlorn, his anger quietens.

"Ah fuck, Stan, I'm sorry," Richie says, and he sounds it.

Stan nods, and gives him a serious look. "I'm gonna give you a pass for all your shit tonight because you're clearly going through something, but we're gonna talk about this later, alright? Just nod for yes."

Richie is smart enough to just nod.

"Are your parents home?" Stan asks him.

Richie nods again. "My parets – parenst - parents. They're not going to like this, haha," he says, with a fake laugh. "Who cares?"

Stan swears under his breath. "Ok, well, mine aren't. So you crash at mine, I'll call your parents and tell them we've decided to watch some movies, and you'll be home tomorrow morning."

Richie sways a little, but smiles. "Thanks Stan," he says feebly. More worryingly, he doesn't even add a nickname.

He still looks miserable. Stan feels for him – he's pretty sure he knows what Richie's going through, even though they've never talked about it – at least until the stale, putrid smell of vomit wafts up from his shoes. Then he feels less emotionally generous.

He was supposed to be inside, dancing with Rachel. He'd gone to get them drinks, and Mike had alerted him to the situation, and now instead of using the empty house with Rachel, he is going to be putting a drunk Richie to bed. It wasn't exactly the romantic evening he had planned. Then again, he and Rachel had been kind of off-kilter all night. He wasn't exactly sad to get away.

He can't let Richie get in trouble. Richie's gotten him out of trouble before.

They might be deeply annoyed with each other sometimes, but they still have to help.

Mike comes up to them supporting Ben. Ben looks a little green around the gills, but Mike looks – and smells – vomit free.

“So, what are we doing? I can drive them home if you want to go back in. I promise I’m stone cold sober,” he says, and smiles a little. He’s so steady and competent, and Stan is suddenly very grateful he’s here to help.

Mike looks at Stan’s ruined shoes, but surprisingly not with disgust, even though they smell like a decomposing animal carcass. “That looks bad. Do you want a lift home as well?”

Stan half-smiles. “I’m thinking we kill two birds with one stone. Richie needs somewhere parentless to crash, I need to not smell like a chemical toilet, could you drop us back to mine?”

“Right, your parents are out of town too,” Mike says, nodding. “Sounds like a plan. Richie seems like he might crash any minute so we should probably get moving.”

Stan looks at Richie, whose eyelids are fluttering closer to shut with every moment and is still swaying. “Good point.”

Mike smiles and for a moment, it makes him forget he’s covered in puke and tired from trying to corral a drunken Richie.

Then Mike nods behind him, looking suddenly serious. He turns to see Rachel, arms crossed. Not looking happy at all.

“What the fuck, Stan?” she hisses. “You went off for drinks, and you disappear, and you’re just – “ she continues furiously, and then stops, wrinkling her nose. “You smell like death –“ she looks down, and jumps back a little. “God, did you throw up? Have you been drinking?”

“It’s not mine,” he says irritably. He’s truly not in the mood for this shit. “Richie’s the drunk one. He threw up on me.”

She notices Richie, and recoils. He grins drunkenly at her. “Rachel’s here! Hi, Rachel!”

"Shut the hell up, Richie," she snaps. "You've made sure my date can't come back inside."

She looks back at Stan. "He needs to go home," she says, with finality.

Stan feels silently grateful, and a little surprised, that she agrees. He softens. "I'm sorry I left you, I was getting us drinks and then Mike was worried about Ben and Richie and thought we needed to get them out before they got into trouble."

Rachel looks around at Ben, who Mike is now helping up. "Yeah, well clearly they need to get out of here. Is Mike driving them home?"

Stan nods. "Yeah, and I'm really, really sorry, Rach –" he says, apprehensively.

She anticipates it before he finishes, a horrified look on her face. She shakes her head. "No – no Stan, you better not be fucking thinking what I think you're thinking – don't you dare say it –"

He looks at her, remorseful, but continues on anyway. "I think Richie should come back with me tonight – I'm sorry, I know it wasn't the plan, but he needs to sleep it off."

"So drop him off at his own house! Did you somehow forget what our plans were, Stan?" she says, meaningfully, voice rising with panic.

He sighs, tiredly. "He can't go back to his house like this, Rach. His parents will freak."

Rachel throws her arms up. "How is that your problem, Stan?"

"Because he's my friend! We look out for each other!" he replies, frustrated.

She rolls her eyes. "You know what? I am so fucking sick of your tragic little island of misfit toys, and how obsessed you all are with each other!" she shouts at him, and glares at Mike, Ben and Richie, behind him as well. "That goes for you assholes, too! I'm so sick of coming second to them, Stan!"

"Hey, don't call my friends assholes!" he retorts, furiously.

She glares at him, and her eyes are watery but he's having a hard time feeling bad for her when he's feeling so angry.

She folds her arms again and steels her gaze.

"Are you going with them?" she asks, icily.

He looks at her, frustrated. "They're my friends, I'm not leaving them."

Rachel throws up her hands, furiously, glaring at him like an old witch about to cast a hex. "Then we're fucking over, alright Stan? I'm so fucking done with this co-dependent bullshit," she says, bitterly cold.

"Seriously? Because I care about my friends?" he says, shocked and hurt. He shouldn't continue, but he does. "Or because you don't care about any of yours nearly as much?"

She narrows her eyes so much they're almost slits, coldness turning into hot anger in her expression. Before he can duck, she slaps him in the face, turns on her heel and storms off, back in the direction of the prom.

In a horribly ironic twist of fate, Stan recognises the song playing distantly from the gym. Bon Jovi power-ballading, "Yeah I will love you, baby – always and I'll be there – forever and a day, always – "

He lets out a frustrated groan, and rubs his eyes. He's wearing contacts and they feel sore. "I fucking hate Bon Jovi," he says to himself, breathing heavy, exhausted and coursing with adrenaline and emotion.

He turns back to the boys. Mike looks anxious. Even Richie and Ben look a little nervous, although Richie seems barely cognisant of what's just happened.

No one says anything. "Well, are we going or what?" he says fiercely, still panting a little. No one disagrees, and he helps Mike support the other two into the truck, Ben saying he'd appreciate getting some air in the back so Richie and him can share the cab's passenger seat.

They drop Ben off first because his house is closer.

"You sure you're alright to go home?" Stan asks, as he and Mike help him down from the truck. "I'm sure I could find a spare mattress at mine."

Ben shakes his head, seemingly less drunk. He'd gotten the worst up outside the gym and the ride back in the truck bed seems to have sobered him up a bit.

"No, I'm alright," Ben says, sounding tired. "It's just my mom home tonight, and she'll most likely have fallen asleep already. Her hospital shift would've ended about two hours ago, I think."

Ben seems deeply exhausted, kind of washed out. Stan knows why, even if they don't really talk about it. It's painful to think he can't do anything about it, that Ben's hurting over something that isn't anyone's fault. It just is what it is.

Mike looks at him, eyes big with concern, and reaches out an arm, resting it on Ben's soft bicep.

"Are you ok, though? I know it was kind of a rough night. Stan's happy to have you round if you want to be around people," he asks, seriously. The level of care and concern Mike has for them all is always a wonder to watch, and as Stan watches it he feels a deep pang in his heart.

"Yeah, absolutely, if you can put up with Richie's snores you're welcome to come back with us," Stan agrees. "Really, Ben."

Ben smiles, a little. "Thanks, you guys. You're so – you're so good," he says, and looks unfocused for a moment, but then refocuses on them. His eyes are still a little sad, but he sounds genuine. "I love you guys, y'know? And soon I'll be on this summer internship and I won't get to see you off for college, but I know it's gonna be great because you guys are great, and kind, and the right people will see that and love you."

Stan feels another pang. He doesn't want to think about leaving everyone soon and meeting new people. He doesn't want new people to love and to love him, yet.

Ben colours, after his impromptu speech. "I'm sorry, I'm still a bit drunk," he says sheepishly.

"It's fine," Mike says beaming, and they both hug him.

"We love you too, alright," Stan says, smiling to himself.

Ben sounds surprised and happy as they release him, replying, "Wow, coming from you? That means a lot."

Stan grins, but half-heartedly rolls his eyes. "If I said it all the time it'd lose its meaning."

Mike chuckles, very quietly.

They're driving back to Stan's now, and were it not for the radio being on in the truck it would be very quiet. Richie is basically asleep next to Stan, lying against the window. He had woken up just long enough to demand they put it on his favourite alternative station.

For some reason Stan is just sitting in silence, focusing on the songs on the radio, instead of trying to talk to Mike. But Mike isn't really talking to him either.

It's not a cold silence, exactly. He doesn't know what it is, really – he can't even see the shape of it.

He listens to the radio. It's a song by that band that Richie likes. They're a bit mopey, but Stan finds he's liking this particular mopey song.

"Well, I walk in the air between the rain. Through myself and back again."

Stan idly remembers a book from his childhood, a book of Jewish children's stories featuring a rabbi that convinces a group of twenty-nine witches that he is magical and walked between the raindrops to stay dry on his journey to find them and wonders if the lyric is a reference to that. Maybe he's misjudged the mopey band.

"Round here, we're carving out our names. Round here, we all look the same."

He looks at Mike. Mike is looking steadily at the road.

He wants to say something, but he's not sure what, so he doesn't.

He keeps thinking about Rachel's face just before they left. He was probably a bit of an asshole, now that he thinks about it. She wasn't great either, but he wasn't – kind. Mike would have been. He'd like to be more like that. Less frustrated with people's bullshit.

He's less pumped with the adrenaline from it and is starting to feel guilty, but he also still feels like – he could have been nicer, sure, but he's never going to regret choosing to help his friends. And he's still mad that she yelled at them.

He's surprised by the intensity that the low-key song has worked up, and it catches on something inside him as he looks out at the dark streets and houses he's over-familiar with.

"I, I can't see nothing, nothing round here, you catch me if I'm falling, you catch me if I'm falling, will you catch me?" the singer spits out, in an emotional torrent.

Stan gulps, and almost wishes Richie was awake, sucking up all the oxygen like he does in any given situation.

There's quiet for a moment and then Stan realises Mike's stopping the truck because they're at his house.

Mike looks at him. "So...you doing ok?" he asks, concerned.

"With?" Stan asks, momentarily forgetting the entire night. Mike raises his eyebrows. "Oh – the, uh – yeah."

He doesn't say anything for a moment. "I mean, I don't feel great right now, but I'm not sorry for leaving."

Mike looks sympathetic. "I'm sorry you're feeling bad. Maybe there's a chance you can make up?"

Stan chuckles hollowly. "Yeah, I doubt it." He thinks for a moment. "But I guess...I'm sorry for hurting her, but I actually think it's a good thing that we broke up. We're both going to college soon, and we weren't going to do long-distance, you know?"

Mike nods. "Yeah, I think even Bill and Bev are having to accept that."

Stan nods, suddenly feeling sad. He and Rachel might have been pretty snippy with each other towards the end, but Bill and Bev seem to still be pretty deeply in love. It must be a lot scarier and more heartbreaking, having to decide to leave someone you're still very much in love with. He's not sure he could.

"So," Mike starts, and coughs. "If it wasn't for...college...you'd want to be with her?"

Stan stops. He's not sure what Mike's asking. "I – I mean, I loved her –"

"Loved her?" Mike echoes, in a strange kind of voice.

"Of course I loved her, Mike," Stan says, slightly indignant. "I dated her for long enough."

"Yeah, Stan, I remember." Mike says and there's still something strange in his tone. "Loved. Past tense."

Past tense. Past tense. Past tense. Past tense.

He's speechless for a moment. "Are you actually – " he starts, and then Richie stirs, making him jump.

"I need to get out," he says ominously, and Stan dives for the door handle to let him out. He stumbles, just managing not to fall and throws up again.

Stan looks back at Mike.

"We should probably – " he starts.

"Get him inside? Yeah," Mike agrees, grimacing over at Richie.

They lay Richie down in Stan's bed, figuring it's easier than looking after him while they organise sheets and make up the couch. Stan threatens bloody murder if he throws up again, and provides him with a bucket. Richie agrees monosyllabically before passing out cold.

They stand around awkwardly in the hall.

"So, you're free to go now," he says, with a chuckle that comes out sounding weird even to his ears. "Thanks for, uh, helping with Richie. You didn't need to stay, but you really helped."

Mike smiles. "I wanted to, it's ok."

The hallway is actually very narrow, Stan realises. It's narrow and he's probably asphyxiating poor, very helpful Mike with the acidic stench from his shoes and the bottom of his pants, which he hasn't had a chance to change, and Mike is too polite to mention it.

"But I'm sure you want to be getting back. I smell so bad I might throw up next, so I'm not sure how you're still here," he bursts out, quickly. "You should probably go."

Mike expression falls, just the smallest bit, but Stan notices. "Right - I should be - getting back," he says, awkwardly.

He turns and walks out of the open door, onto the porch.

"Wait, Mike," he calls, not really knowing what he's going to say.

Mike turns, looking surprised. He walks back through the front door, but stays near the threshold. Keeps a healthy few feet between them.

"You're not going back to the farmhouse are you? Because I'm pretty sure that Bill and Bev had -" he starts, and stops at Mike's look.

"I know that, jeez," he says, not annoyed but looking vaguely disturbed. "I promised Bev she could have the house to herself."

"Where are you staying? Were you supposed to go with Ben?" He asks, instantly guilty. "You shouldn't have come back to help, I'm sorry."

Mike shakes his head. "I wasn't staying at Ben's, don't worry about it. I should probably -"

"Where are you going, then?" Stan asks, confused.

Mike looks uncomfortable, and shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe just drive around for a bit. If I really need to crash I can sleep in the truck. Look at the stars. I have a sleeping bag. It's fine."

Stan gives him a look. "You can't be serious. I have a spare mattress, just stay here."

Mike rubs his neck, awkward. He looks at Stan.

"Do you want me to stay?"

Stan is taken aback by the question. "Uh - yeah. Yes. I wouldn't have offered otherwise."

Mike smiles, something in his eyes. "Ok, then thanks."

He walks further inside, then stops, looking decisively at Stan. "Back in the car - what were you gonna say?"

Stan is surprised at the way his heart jumps at this, like missing a step.

He opens and closes his mouth. He decides to go ahead with it. He sets his jaw and looks at Mike. "Back there - for a moment, it sounded like you were mad at me. For Rachel."

Mike looks strangely, quietly incredulous. "Why would I be mad at you?"

Stan wasn't expecting this response, and it makes him sort of indignant. His face works.

"Come on, you know why," he gets out in a strangled voice.

"Do you want me to be mad?" Mike asks, sounding more annoyed.

"No, of course not," he replies, feeling like things are coming out twisted. "I just - I don't know -"

Mike looks kind of hurt, actually, more than that, he looks annoyed. Stan feels even more guilty and wishes he'd never started talking.

Mike looks away and then back at him. "Because, you know, if I was mad - which I'm not, but if I was - it wouldn't really be your business, Stan." He stares defiantly at him.

Stan feels that pressure-cooker feeling that he gets sometimes, a need to defend himself - but to what charge he doesn't really know.

He's speechless again, for a moment. No one says anything.

"I did love Rachel, ok, and you're right, I don't now – but you can't be mad at me for it, ok?" he says, annoyed but realising there's a definite edge of desperation in it.

Mike looks incredulous again. Maybe more so now. "Stan, what the hell?, I'm not mad, but I'm getting kind of sick of you telling me I can't be. You know that's not fair." He says the last words quietly, hurt His eyes are big and hurt too, and he can't look at Stan like that. He never looks at Stan like that.

It's unbearable.

The pressure cooker shrieks and Stan bursts. Something he'd been trying not to say for a year and a half. "Not fair? I only asked Rachel out because you started dating Denise Evans! Not even a month after that stupid party!"

He really cannot believe he's actually said it out loud. It wasn't like he didn't like the idea of dating Rachel – they used to be pretty friendly at temple, and he'd always thought she was pretty. Although, he's a little ashamed to admit to himself, he noticed it more when she got her braces off. But he'd known – and then later, secretly feared – that Mike being more popular would give him access to a number of attractive girls who he could date. And he'd been right.

"A cheerleader? Really?" he blurts, like an aftershock of stupid words. It's almost like he's watching himself outside his body. He's not being fair at all, he knows it. But he can't seem to stop his bottled-up feelings about the whole thing coming out now.

Mike looks speechless with incredulity, shaking his head slightly. He raises a hand, makes some kind of attempted gesture like squeezing an imaginary stress ball, and then speaks.

"I can't believe you're getting mad at me for dating someone. For four months, which is way less than...I can't believe you're the one telling me that what I did after that was unfair," he says, just sounding bone-deep tired and hurt.

Stan would rather he was angry. He's apparently possessed by some kind of monster tonight. "Only because she moved away! She –" he says, strangled. He's screaming at himself mentally to stop talking. "You went and found someone else who could understand you better than I could –"

Mike raises his eyebrows. "Wow, really?" he says, with a dry humour that's unlike him. "No, actually you're right – we did bond over how weird it was that even the people that liked us were trying to force their only black friends to go out with each other."

There is a deeply uncomfortable silence.

Mike looks at him and his eyes are misty, and Stan would like a do-over of everything from the moment they left Ben. He's not even sure what he'd say. Not this. This isn't Denise's fault. She was nice, and Stan would have probably gotten along really well with her if just seeing her hadn't killed him a little inside.

"Anyway, this isn't about Denise. It's about what happened after the party. I thought I did what you wanted," he says, like he's run out of energy and is barely surviving on fumes. "I understood, you know. It was all too much. But please don't tell me I've been unfair, because I did what you wanted."

"I –" Stan says, and his courage fails him. He wants to reach out and comfort Mike, but he's just a little too far away. He wants to not be the reason Mike's upset. He wants to not be the reason two people are upset, because he can't seem to get anything right tonight.

Mike looks at him for a moment, then looks down and back up. "I think I should probably go, Stan. We'll be ok. In the morning." He doesn't even look angry, just disappointed. And as he has been steadily since this whole conversation started, hurt in an expected kind of way.

Stan can't believe this is happening again. That even though he's a nightmare of a friend, and has just gotten mad at him – after he gave him a lift home and helped with Richie, which would have sucked way more on his own – he's trying to make things ok with them.

Well not this time. This time he's sober, though he feels like this would be easier if he wasn't – and he knows for certain that his parents are out of

town, together, and won't have a chance to inadvertently ruin things.

Mike turns to go again, and Stan blurts out – “I fucked up, Mike. I’m sorry.” He wishes his voice didn’t sound so awkward and needy, but there it is.

He watches Mike’s shoulders stiffen as he pauses, not turning around yet. He waits. Mike turns slowly, looking like he’s not sure what to expect.

“I couldn’t handle being drunk, and feeling so much for you, and the thought of my dad finding us, and the shock of finding out that horrible thing he did,” Stan says, anguished. Why didn’t he say this ages ago? But he’s saying it now, even if it is too late. Better late than never.

Mike is looking caught off guard now, but the hurt in his eyes is slowly being replaced by something softer. He comes a little closer.

Stan continues, emboldened. “And it fucked up my relationship with him. But I never wanted to fuck up my relationship with you, and I’m afraid that in my fear of doing that, I really, really hurt you. And I was selfish, and I didn’t give you space to forget about it, and I’m just really, really, fucking sorry, Mike,” he says, and he realises his voice is shaking a bit.

Mike comes closer, eyes shining, and wraps him in a hug. Stan is so relieved he could cry. If he does, it’s hidden in the shoulder of Mike’s tux jacket.

Mike releases him, so he can look at Stan and tip his chin up gently to look back at Mike.

“Hey,” he says, almost unbearably warm. “I’m really not mad, ok? It was bad timing. It’s not your fault you learned that about your Dad.”

Stan sighs. “Yeah...honestly I don’t know what we would’ve done if I hadn’t freaked out.”

Mike smiles, “Yeah. We couldn’t exactly have gone on dates at the diner, I guess. Or the ice-cream shop. Can you imagine?”

Stan chuckles, darkly. “A Jewish boy and a black boy? I think everyone would drop dead out of sheer horror and confusion.”

Mike returns a rueful smile. "Certainly would have made for an interesting senior year," he says, moving his face closer to Stan's.

Stan's heart is thrumming with the kind of anticipation he had a little over a year and a half ago, sitting in the upstairs area of the synagogue, trying to work up the drunken nerve to tell a friend something very important.

"Oh yeah. Although, I fear for all those study sessions we had this year, if we'd been together. My GPA would be real bad," he replies quietly, smirking, moving his face closer.

Mike reaches out to hold Stan's face in his hands. Their foreheads touch, and Mike closes his eyes for a moment, looking blissful. "Oh yeah, no Princeton for you," he says, with quiet laughter in his tone. He opens his eyes, looking very closely at Stan.

Half of Stan wants to make the move now, because he feels like he's on fire – but the other half feels floaty and wants to stay like this, just looking at him, this close, for a lot longer.

"You could've taken me to Prom," Mike says. And it's the kind of thing that's funny precisely because it's so obviously impossible. Which not everyone finds funny, but Stan gets his sense of humour from his grandfather, and he knows that sometimes if you don't laugh you'll never stop crying.

"Mmm," Stan says, happily. "I know you're joking, but – wish I'd gone with you instead. Would have had – mostly – a way better night."

Mike chuckles at this. is very close. He blinks, and suddenly, he's not feeling Mike's forehead against his, and he physically reacts to the loss of warmth and contact by moving forward. "Hey, where d'you –" he starts, looking accusingly at Mike. "I think you're forgetting something."

Mike has a strange, wild, excited look on his face. "Can you wait for me? I need to go get something. I'll be like, twenty minutes tops," he says, excitedly, beaming.

"What? Where are you going?" Stan asks, confused and a little put out that he's not still five seconds away from being kissed.

Mike grins. "Just trust me? And maybe change out of those shoes and

pants.”

Stan looks down and remembers that he smells like a compost bin, and Mike willingly stood very close to him for a while, and smiles in a helpless, happy sort of way.

“Twenty minutes tops?” he asks.

“Don’t fall asleep, ok? And don’t put your pjs on yet,” Mike says, with a grin, and then he takes off back to his truck.

Twenty minutes later, Stan has had a shower and started soaking his pants, put his shoes in a plastic bag and thrown them out, in case one of his parents sees his formal shoes all sticky and smelly in the trash and assumes that he was the one drinking.

Per Mike’s somewhat mysterious instructions, he’s just put on a different pair of slacks and a long-sleeve button-up instead of changing for bed. There is a knock on the door as he’s aimlessly watching some cop show on tv, not really paying attention.

His heart jumps and he rushes to the door, but attempts to open it with a modicum of cool. This goes out the window when he sees Mike there, beaming.

He doesn’t have anything with him.

“What did you go and do?” he asks, suspiciously, letting him in.

“You look nice,” Mike replies, and something in him melts, making him smile like an idiot.

“Is Big Bertha still in the living room, or will you have to venture into your room to get her?” Mike asks, somewhat enigmatically.

“Living room,” Stan replies, raising an eyebrow. “But honestly, I was just in my room grabbing clothes. Richie’s dead to the world. You know what he’s like. You could probably host a marching band in there without waking him right now.”

Mike just grins. "That's good."

He spots the tape deck in the living room and darts over to it.

"You know, you could just use the sound system?" Stan points out, half heartedly, grinning.

Mike covers the speakers of the tape deck like a child's ears. "Hush, don't insult Bertha that way."

Stan can't help but laugh.

Mike takes a tape out of his pocket, and Stan wonders if this is what he rushed off to get. That would be crazy though, all that for one cassette tape. He has tapes here. He's confused. Mike puts it in the player, and turns around again.

Then the song starts playing, and all he can do is look at Mike in open-mouthed surprise. "You –" he says, and can't quite find the words.

They'd been listening to it once on the radio, for the first time. They'd been smoking pot with Richie, which wasn't something he did all the time but it did have the benefit of quieting his constant anxiety – college, girlfriend, friends, parents, grades, small town, temple, hatred, nightmares, unresolved trauma – and Richie had already known what it was.

"Ohhh, I like this song," Mike had said, mellow, and laughed. "Do you know it, Richie?"

Richie nodded slowly, stretched out on the cushions at the clubhouse. "It's good, isn't it?"

There was something soft in his voice, soft and slightly cracked. "I'll put it on the mix I'm making you, Mikey Mike."

Mike beamed, loose and open. "Thanks, Rich."

Stan looked at him as they listened to the song quietly. Mike looked back. "Pretty, right?" he whispered, stoned and happy. Stan had smiled. Mike's pupils were dilated, his eyes had a kind of sparkle to them. "Yeah," he whispered back, slowly, letting the music wash over him.

The slow, strummed guitar chords of the song's intro play as Mike extends a formal hand out to him, smiling. "It's prom night. Care to dance?"

Stan is still speechless, but he's smiling like an idiot. He takes Mike's hand and they start slow dancing.

"Fade into you, I think it's strange you never knew," the singer sings dreamily from the speakers.

He's letting Mike lead. He's never been the one to get held. He thinks he could get used to it.

"Did you hear when they played this, earlier?" Stan asks, resting against Mike's collarbone.

"Yep," Mike says, an element of sad humour in his tone. "I – saw you and Rachel dancing to it. You looked – cute."

Stan lifts his head to look at Mike. "She didn't get it. The song. I never wished it was you and me dancing more than that moment."

Mike beams at him, the glad glint of his dark eyes back. "Well, imagine how I felt," he says, his tone teasing but Stan can tell there's more than a kernel of truth to it.

"Is that why you ran back home to get the tape?" Stan asks. "You didn't run into –"

Mike grimaces slightly, but can't stop smiling. "No. Still at prom," he says. "I figured we deserved a dance, at least."

Stan can't stop smiling either. "Good call, Mike," he says, snuggling back up to him.

"You put your hands into your head, and then its smiles cover your heart," goes the speakers.

Suddenly, Stan has a small, soft epiphany. It shouldn't really be a revelation, but there's been a lot going on tonight, and he's only managed to process it all in this moment.

He feels Mike's strong arms around him, and nestles into his chest, and

the whole town, the whole world is just the two of them. "I think I'm in love with you," he says softly, surprising even himself with his forthrightness.

He isn't really the kind of person to just say it, and not insanely soon – although he realises, he's not sure when he started. Just that he realised around the start of eleventh grade, and it's been growing since, clearly, even when he didn't mean it to.

"Oh," Mike says, in the kind of soft, surprised way he did a year and half earlier in the darkened synagogue. Stan pulls up to look at him. He looks slightly stunned, and nothing short of radiantly happy.

The song has ticked over while he wasn't paying attention, and he catches a line about, "I know I've felt like this before, but now I'm feeling it even more, because it came from you," and if Stan didn't definitively know better, he'd think Richie had made this mix specifically for this moment. Or to declare his own love for one Michael Hanlon.

Mike tips Stan's face up gently and leans forward so their heads are touching again.

"You make me feel calm," Stan whispers, and he wants to shout it from the rooftops but he also can't make himself any louder. "And safe. You still do."

Mike couldn't look any happier, but he doesn't say anything. He just leans forward and closes the few inches of distance between them, kissing Stan soundly, and something hot like the fuse of a firecracker – more intensely than the first time, even – explodes inside of him.

Later, Stan leads Mike into the basement.

"I haven't been down here in forever," Mike says, grinning as they go down the stairs.

Stan turns back to face him, feeling kind of embarrassed, now that's he's here. It had seemed like a good idea when they were upstairs, making out on the couch. "I get it, if it's weird. I just thought, I'd – I'd already made it up –"

Mike is staring at the area where the futon is, open mouthed. "You did all

this?”

Stan nods, feeling himself reddening. “It’s not much, it’s just some of those twinkly lights we bought last winter. And some flower petals.” He’d also washed the nicest linen he was allowed to use for down here and made the bed, but it felt petty to say that.

Mike looks at it, now they’re closer to it, and then looks back at him. “I can’t quite decide if I’m mad at Rachel or deeply grateful to her. I mean, she let you go, but then again she let you go.”

Stan smiles at him. He likes seeing Mike in the warm, low lights. “I know the feeling.”

Mike kisses him again. That’s also something he could get used to. The hot feeling returns.

He kisses Mike for a little longer. Any moment now something awkward is bound to happen, and kissing is one thing but he doesn’t want to freak Mike out, so he pulls away.

“So, uh, I just thought you’d probably like to sleep somewhere nicer than the upstairs couch,” he says, voice higher than he’d like.

Mike grins at him, taking his hand so he can’t pull away too far, and Stan feels genuinely weak in the knees, which he had previously thought was just an expression. “Yeah, it’s very nice here. I’d like that,” he says, and there’s a slight, but definite teasing tone to his voice.

He looks at Mike, semi-suspicious, but still unable to keep from smiling. “What?”

Mike feigns innocence, laughing a little. Then his expression becomes just as caring, but more serious. “I – um – would understand, if you didn’t want to do this, tell me honestly. It’s been a big night...” he says, and laughs self-consciously, looking down and then up. “But I was thinking...it might get kind of lonely, down here. By myself. If you wanted to – stay – that might be. Nice.”

Stan’s heart beats fast. He tries to think about why that would be a bad idea. Even if it was just more fooling around with each other. But who is he kidding, the reason he’d suggested going to the basement wasn’t just

because he wanted to show Mike a spare bed. He'd set this up, with a fairly romantic evening in mind, he just hadn't realised who he was making it for at the time.

Mike looks suddenly guilty. "I'm sorry, Stan, I didn't mean to – obviously, I wouldn't ever want to make you feel pressured to – I just, I think I'm a bit hormone-crazy from earlier, we don't have to –"

"No, I want to," Stan interrupts, heart beating fast, but not in the horrible-anxiety way he's too familiar with. This feels like courage. "Because we won't have this chance again, Mike, and you think you're going crazy? I am going out of my mind right now, I just didn't want to freak you out –"

Mike grins and kisses him, effectively cutting off his train of thought and most of his higher brain function.

After a moment, Mike pulls back, slightly.

"Nghh," Stan says.

"So you have –" Mike says, with slight awkwardness.

It takes a moment for Stan's hormone-clouded teenage brain to register his meaning. "Uh – oh. Right. Yes. Next to the bed. Everything important."

Mike chuckles softly. "Everything important?"

Stan laughs, sheepish. "I was just trying to be prepared." He pauses. "It's not weird for you that I set this up for someone else? A girl?" he asks, and then feels even more embarrassed.

Mike grins. "No, not unless it is for you?"

Stan shakes his head. "I really only set it up because I thought it would be romantic and nice, and she wasn't going to do something like this for me any time soon. Sometimes being the boyfriend sucks," he says, and then realises the inherent ridiculousness of that statement given his current situation, and cringes, putting his hand over his face in shame.

Mike chuckles again, removing Stan's hand and kissing it. "Hey, hey, it's alright. I'll make you cute romantic setups if you want."

Stan stares at him, struck dumb by affection and just kisses him again. "I love you, Mikey," he says into it.

Mike pulls back, just by an inch to reply. "I love you too, Stan. Although if you haven't gotten that by now, I'd be seriously worried about you..."

Stan chuckles and pulls him closer so he can kiss him and start unbuttoning his white shirt.

Mike holds him after, and he lies on Mike's chest and listens to his beating heart through his warm skin. He knows that logically it is some kind of hour, and that the sun will be up the normal amount of time after this hour that it normally is, and they will have to figure out where to go from here before then, maybe. But lying like this, he can't quite believe it. That he can't just stay here in this moment and have no one intrude on it, forever.

"So, what are we gonna do about Richie?" Mike asks after a while. They've been talking off and on, chilled out and comfortable in each other's arms.

"Richie?" Stan asks, blankly.

"You know, currently passed out in your bed Richie? One of your best friends?" Mike teases.

Stan swears. "I completely forgot he was here. Wow." He sits up slightly to prop himself up on one hand so he can look at Mike quizzically. "What are we doing about him?"

Mike rolls his eyes, exaggeratedly and Stan grins. Mike almost never does that. He looks back at Stan. "At some point tomorrow morning he's going to wake up and go looking for you, and find you not crashing on the couch. Do you want me to be here?"

Stan feels, impossibly, a kind of physical pain at the idea of him leaving. "Yes," he says immediately. Mike smiles, almost caught-off-guard, and Stan wants to kiss him again, but he senses this conversation is important.

Mike looks up at him, smiling so affectionately Stan almost can't look

directly at him. He can't look away either. "I suppose what I mean is...this is new territory, and neither of us are naïve about what it means to be here, in this town. Do we tell the others? I know they at least wouldn't hate us. But it might be kinda weird?"

Stan hates to admit it to himself, but he feels fingers of anxiety clawing at his gut the moment Mike brings up telling anyone. He looks down, studies a hair on Mike's chest. "Do you think that maybe we could," he says, and finds himself looking at Mike again. "Not tell anyone about it, right now? I just – I just – it's not that I don't trust them, you know I love them, but I'm – I don't – I'm not sure I want anyone to – and it's not because I'm ashamed of you, like, I would tell everyone if I didn't think that was a good way to get us beaten up –"

"Hey, hey," Mike says gently, reaching a comforting hand up to his face. He hadn't realised he'd been anxiety-babbling. "I agree, it's ok. If you don't want to tell anyone, I won't tell anyone."

Stan looks at him, still worried and wishing he wasn't. "I mean anyone, though, Mikey," he says quietly. "Not even Bev. Not yet, anyway."

Mike looks surprised for a moment, then nods. "I promise."

Stan smiles, and leans down to kiss him.

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Bev stares at Stan, open-mouthed, for a moment. True to his word, he'd left out the finer details of the night, not that he was the type to talk about that in great detail with anyone. But he'd left in enough that she knew what had happened.

"Oh my god, Stan," she says, recovering. "That was a hell of a story. You went from 0-100 in like, one night," she says, trying to keep quiet even as she's digesting the new information.

Stan nods, feeling his cheeks warm. "Making up for lost time, I guess," he says, and Bev smiles a little. "And, opportunities where both my parents were out? Extremely rare."

Bev raises her eyebrows in understanding. "Fair enough, I guess, yeah."

There's a moment of quiet. She looks at him. "So, what happened?"

Stan sighs. "Well, not much else to say that you didn't guess. We were together – secretly – for the summer until I left for Princeton."

"But?" Bev asks, not missing a beat.

Stan looks at his empty glass for a moment, then looks back up. "We decided – well we both agreed, but Mike brought it up, early on – he knew I'd just gotten out of my longest relationship, and that we weren't going to do long-distance, so jumping into a new one and doing that would be dumb. We both kind of realised that we'd barely get to see each other, with him at Maine U. Not with that eight-hour drive, and so we'd both be holding each other back once we were experiencing new things in college. We just – decided it would be the summer, and then that was it," he says, matter-of-fact. Hadn't stopped it hurting like hell at the time though. The day he'd left for college had been one of the worst days of his life, and even then that had included 'almost being murdered by a serial killer'.

Bev looks sympathetic. "You couldn't have *tried* to do long-distance?"

Stan frowns. "Well, look at you and Bill. You knew the same thing we did."

Bev nods. "Yeah, I guess you're right. But Bill and I had nearly four years...you only had maybe two and a half months."

He nods, rueful. "Shit timing, I know. Wish I'd jumped before Rachel pushed me."

Bev reaches over and squeezes his hand. She looks at him quizzically. "But you guys stayed in touch. Longer than any of us – he was your best man, wasn't he?" Bev asks, and then pauses. "Did Patty ever know?" she asks, but gently.

He looks down, guilty. "I know it makes me look super bad, all of that but – it wasn't meant to be like –" he looks back up, and Bev looks sympathetic and sad. "I'm just – you know I've never been good at goodbyes...I thought, either we'd fall out of touch, or we'd get back –" he says, and gulps. She puts a hand on his. He looks at her,

grateful for it. “But, like I said, shit timing. And neither of us really wanted to bring it up, the further we got away from it - maybe out of self-preservation - and we started telling each other about our lives and who we were dating, and we sort of just – packed it away – and pretended we were friends like we used to be. And then it kind of *worked*, and college kept us busy, and by the time I met Pat sophomore year, it just seemed like it was so distant I didn’t need to tell her.”

He sighs. “Or maybe I was afraid. I don’t know. I didn’t tell her about Mike, even when I told her about myself. I was so afraid she wouldn’t get it, and she was so cool about it, and Mike had finally come to visit me in New Jersey and they’d gotten on well, and I think I was just – I was so afraid of pushing it, if I told her our history.”

“Right,” Bev says, understanding. She smiles at him, a little sadly. “You know I can’t judge. I shut people out of my life that I should have kept. Can’t blame you for doing the opposite.”

Stan nods, sombrelly. “We didn’t see each other much in person in the last few years. A few times. He came to Atlanta a few times, and we all had dinner. But we were rarely in the same place, and we had our lives. It was mostly emails, and then the whole thing with Patty – I felt too...ashamed, to tell him, so I just didn’t reply to his last email. Isn’t that stupid?”

Bev shakes her head, resolutely. “It’s not. You’d just had your worst breakup, with someone who you loved so much and had to break up with even though there wasn’t a relationship breakdown. Why would you want to make it more painful by talking about it with the one person who you’d already done all of that with?”

Stan stares at her, kind of in awe. She had this matter of fact way when they were kids, of putting things in perspective. “I never – thought of that.”

She smiles, lightly. “Maybe I should become a therapist. Mid-life career change.”

He grins, small but present. “You’ve certainly spent a lot of time listening to my problems tonight – or this morning, whatever.”

“Anytime, honey,” she says, squeezing his hand again. “You’re worth every minute.”

“Back at you,” he says, honestly. “It would be bad if I were your actual therapist, but I’m always here to listen as your friend, who happens to be professionally trained.”

Bev smiles. They’re quiet for a moment. She looks at him.

“So, are you going to do anything about it?” she asks, gently, but matter-of-fact again.

He looks at her, taken aback by the question. The answers die in his throat when he first tries to speak. “No. I don’t know,” he says, honestly. “Probably nothing.”

“Alright, Stan,” she says, raising an eyebrow. “But, you know, unlike my situation – “

He raises an eyebrow back. “In which you’re going to?”

She waves a hand dismissively. “In which I’m going to do nothing, because my marriage might be a black hole and a sham, but his probably isn’t – but unlike me,” she says, giving Stan a meaningful look. “Mike’s not married.”

Stan sighs. “Yeah. But I am.”

Notes for the Chapter:

MUCH DRAMA

As I'm not sure I'll be able to update this before all the holiday madness begins, happy holidays to you and yours (or whatever you're doing, hope it's enjoyable!) i hope this was a good early present haha

Author's Note:

also i'm a big nerd and I made a playlist for the losers:

graphic: <https://canva.me/BsOp6pmpj0>

playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/user/minbelle28/>

[playlist/72IAVKuX6H4DUzem8hBmNx?](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/72IAVKuX6H4DUzem8hBmNx?si=kq8hu9KrSH28ku2YeBBS3Q)

[si = kq8hu9KrSH28ku2YeBBS3Q](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/72IAVKuX6H4DUzem8hBmNx?si=kq8hu9KrSH28ku2YeBBS3Q)